



Emmett J. Scott

NEGRO MIGRATION DURING THE WAR

1920, Ch. 3-4

CHAPTER III: Stimulation of the Movement

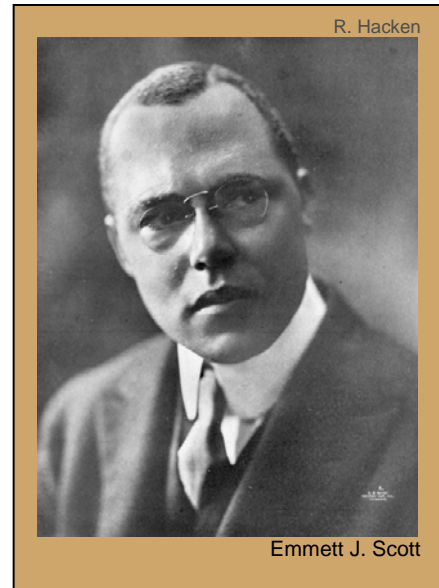
It is not surprising that the exodus grew so contagious when viewed in the light of the numerous factors which played a part in influencing its extension. Considering the temper of the South and its attitude toward any attempt to reduce its labor supply, it is readily apparent that leaders who openly encouraged the exodus would be in personal danger. There were, of course, some few who did venture to voice their belief in it, but they were in most cases speedily silenced. A Methodist minister was sent to jail because he was said to have been enticing laborers to go north and work for a New York firm, which would give employment to fifty of his people. The tactics adopted by influential persons who favored the movement, therefore, were of necessity covert and very much guarded.

One of the chief stimuli was discussion. The very fact that negroes were leaving in large numbers was a disturbing factor. The talk in the barber shops and grocery stores where men were wont to assemble soon began to take the form of reasons for leaving. There it was the custom to review all the instances of mistreatment and injustice which fell to the lot of the negro in the South. It was here also that letters from

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"A Negro family just arrived in Chicago from the rural South," in *The Negro in Chicago* (Chicago Commission on Race Relations), 1922



the North were read and fresh news on the exodus was first given out. In Hattiesburg, Mississippi, it was stated that for a while there was no subject of discussion but the migration. "The packing houses in Chicago for a while seemed to be everything," said one negro. "You could not rest in your bed at night for Chicago." Chicago came to be so common a word that they began to call it "Chi." Men went down to talk with the Chicago porters on the Gulf and Ship Island Railroad which ran through the town. They asked questions about the weather in Chicago. The report was that it was the same as in Hattiesburg.¹

In every circle the advisability of leaving was debated. In the churches the pastors, seeing their flocks leaving, at first

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¹ [Charles S.] Johnson, *Report on the Migration from Mississippi*. [n.d.]

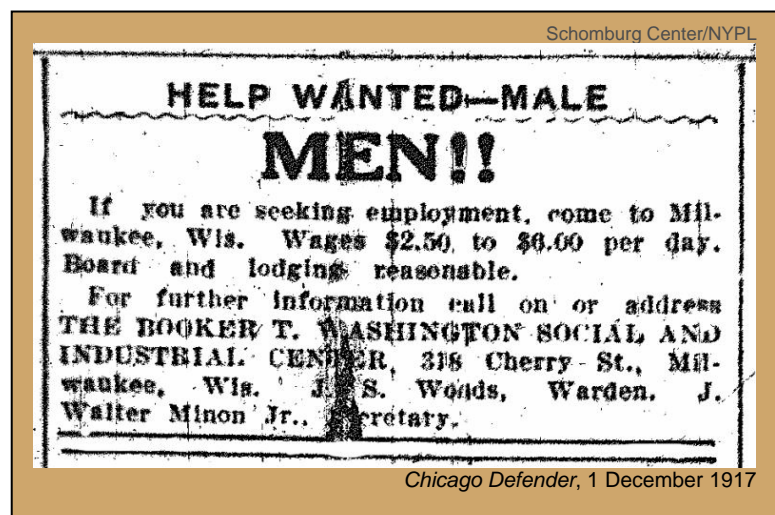
attempted to dissuade them. The people refused to come to church. In the church meetings there were verbal clashes on the matter of the attitude toward the migration. Some few had been careful enough to go north and investigate for themselves and friends. A man learned of the North through a friend whose relatives wrote him from that section. He, thereupon, decided to pay a visit of two weeks, going in August. The attitude of the North overwhelmed him. At Fulton, Kentucky, while he was on the train a white man was sitting in front of him. He wanted to ask him a question but hesitated fearing that he would be rebuffed. He finally addressed the stranger, who answered him courteously and kindly, calling his attention to other points of interest in the North. At Gary, Indiana, he met a gentleman who said he had been mayor of Gary for seven years. He described the Gary school system and promised him an education for his children. He was assured employment at \$4 a day for eight hours' work.²

A still more powerful, though insidious factor, was the work of public speakers who hid their intentions behind their unique method of presentation. In a lecture on the question of migration a speaker, who is a widely known character, made these remarks:

So many of my folks are leaving that I thought I'd go up and see whether or not they had made a mistake. I found thousands of old friends up there making more money than they'd ever made in their lives. I said to one woman in Chicago, "Well, Sister —, I see you're here." "Yes, Brother — I'm here, thank the Lord." "Do you find it any colder up here than it was in Mississippi?" "Did I understand you correctly to say cold? Honey, I mean it's cold. It is *some* cold." "But you expect to return, don't you?" "Don't play with me, chile. What am I going to return for? I should say not. Up here you see when I come out on the street I walk on nice smooth pavements. Down home I got to walk home through the mud. Up here at nights it don't matter much about coming home from church. Down home on my street there ain't a single lamp post. And say, honey, I got a bath tub!"³

He related the instance of his visit to an automobile plant where he was met at the door by a "stalwart, handsome, six-footer as black as midnight." He asked his companion the name of this "potentate." He was told that this man was an experienced machinist. Every car that passed out of that plant must have his O. K. He added further that his salary was something like \$100 a week and that the incident showed the unlimited chance for expansion in the North. When he began to enumerate some of the positions which "men of the race" were holding, the audience became enthusiastic beyond control. One man in the audience, who had been to Detroit, could restrain himself no longer and stood up to inform the audience that there were also colored street car conductors and motormen and that he had seen them with his own eyes. The speaker paid no attention to this interruption and the audience appeared not to notice it, but began to exchange reports among themselves. The speaker added that he had found negroes in the North, well dressed and looking like men — for the first time in their lives — men who were simply "bums" at home. In excusing the indisposition of some negroes toward work, he said, "How in the world can you expect a man to work faithfully all day long for fifty cents?"⁴

Among the important stimuli were the rumors in circulation. When a community is wrought up, it is less difficult to believe remarkable tales. To persons beyond the influence of this excitement it is somewhat difficult to conceive how the rumor that the Germans were on their way through Texas to take the



² Ibid.

³ Johnson, *Report on the Migration from Mississippi*.

⁴ Ibid.

MIGRATION STILL ON, DISPATCHES PROVE

VICKSBURG, Miss., July 30.—Investigations carried on by local authorities indicate that more than 10,000 Colored persons from this section of the state have left for various sections of the North in the last three months. The majority of them are determined to remain.

HELENA, Ark., July 30.—Ever since the Arkansas massacre, Colored people have been quietly leaving Elaine, and other sections of Arkansas, going to Chicago, Michigan, Ohio and other points in the North and East. Whites who are greatly in need of labor, are assuring the people that they will be protected if they remain, but the feeling of unrest cannot be quieted.

MEMPHIS, Tenn., July 30.—The through trains passing via this city on the way to northern communities, for more than four months, have been crowded with men, women and children forming part of another exodus to the North which is due to lynchings and a general state of unrest among the people.

SHREVEPORT, La., July 30.—White people of this section are greatly concerned concerning the new exodus of Colored people on to the North. There has never been such a scarcity of labor as is found here now.

Reports in southern newspapers on the migration, in the *Cleveland [Ohio] Advocate*, 31 July 1920

southern States could have been believed. And yet it is reported that this extravagant fiction was taken seriously in some quarters. On the outskirts of Meridian, Mississippi, a band of gypsies was encamped. The rumor gained circulation that the Indians were coming back to retake their land lost years ago. It was further rumored that the United States Government was beginning a scheme to transport all negroes from the South to break up the Black Belt. Passed from mouth to mouth, unres- trainedly these reports became verities.

It was further asserted on the word and honor "of one in position to know" that the Chicago packing houses needed and would get fifty thousand negroes before the end of the year. One explanation of the belief that the South was overrun with labor agents was the fact that every strange face came to be recognized as a man from the North looking for laborers. If he denied it, they simply thought he was concealing his identity from the police, and if he said nothing, his silence was regarded as sufficient affirmation. Hundreds of disappointments are to be traced to the rumor that a train would leave on a certain date. Hundreds would come to the station prepared to leave and, when no agent appeared, purchased their own tickets.

The questions of wages and privileges were grossly featured. Some men, on being questioned, supposed that it was possible for every common laborer to receive from \$4 to \$10 a day, and that \$50 a week was not an unusual wage. The strength of this belief has been remarked by several social agencies in the North which attempted to supply the immigrants with work. The actual wages paid, though much in excess of those they had been receiving, were often disappointing. Similarly in the matter of privilege and "rights" it was later revealed that unbounded liberty was not to be found in the North. The singular cases of misconduct, against which the more sober minded preached, possibly had their root in the beautiful and one-sided pictures of the North which came to the South.

The *Chicago Defender*, a weekly negro newspaper, with its pronounced radical utterances, its criticism of the South, its policy of retaliation, etc., contributed greatly to the exodus.⁵ Its influence can be imagined when, after reading the southern white

⁵ Some of the material prepared by the *Defender* for consumption in the South was as follows:

"Turn a deaf ear to everybody. You see they are not lifting their laws to help you, are they? Have they stopped their Jim Crow cars? Can you buy a Pullman sleeper where you wish? Will they give you a square deal in court yet? When a girl is sent to prison she becomes the mistress of the guards and others in authority, and women prisoners are put on the streets to work — something they don't do to a white woman. And our leaders will tell you the South is the best place for you. Turn a deaf ear to the scoundrel, and let him stay. Above all, see to it that that jumping-jack preacher is left in the South, for he means you no good here in the North. . . . Once upon a time we permitted other people to think for us — today we are thinking and acting for ourselves, with the result that our 'friends' are getting alarmed at our progress. We'd like to oblige these unselfish (?)

papers with only occasional references to the negroes which might be called commendable and numerous articles which were for the most part distasteful, negroes could read the things they wanted to hear most, expressed in a manner in which they would not dare express them. It voiced the unexpressed thoughts of many and made accusations for which they themselves would have been severely handled. Freud's theory of the suppressed wish finds a happy illustration in this rage over the *Chicago Defender*. Expressed in terms of figures, the circulation of the paper at the beginning of the movement was something like 50,000. In 1918 it had grown to 125,000. It had a large circulation in Mississippi and the supply was usually bought up on the first day of its arrival. Copies were passed around until worn out. One prominent negro asserted that "negroes grab the *Defender* like a hungry mule grabs fodder." In Gulfport, Mississippi, a man was regarded "intelli-gent" if he read the *Defender*. It was said that in Laurel, Mississippi, old men who did not know how to read would buy it because it was regarded as precious.

It was this paper that named the exodus "The Great Northern Drive," and set the date May 15th, announced the arrivals and took responsibility for inducing "the poor brethren" from the South. It was accused of ruining Hattiesburg, Mississippi, by promoting this rush to the North. The sale of this paper was, therefore, forbidden in several towns in the South. A correspondent said: "White people are paying more attention to the race in order to keep them in the South, but the *Chicago Defender* has emblazoned upon their minds 'Bound for the Promised Land.'"

In answer to the warnings of the South against the rigors of the northern winters, the *Defender* said:

To die from the bite of frost is far more glorious than at the hands of a mob. I beg you, my brother, to leave the benighted land. You are a free man. Show the world that you will not let false leaders lead you. Your neck has been in the yoke. Will you continue to keep it there because some "white folks' nigger" wants you to? Leave for all quarters of the globe. Get out of the South. Your being there in the numbers in which you are gives the southern politician too strong a hold on your progress. . . . So much has been said through the white papers in the South about the members of the race freezing to death in the North. They freeze to death down South when they don't take care of themselves. There is no reason for any human being staying in the Southland on this bugaboo handed out by the white press.⁶

[question mark in original] souls and remain slaves in the South; but to other sections of the country we have said, as the song goes, 'I hear you calling me,' and have boarded the train, singing, 'Good-bye, Dixie Land.'"

⁶ The following clippings are taken from these white papers:

"Aged Negro Frozen to Death — Albany, Ga., February 8.

"Yesterday the dead body of Peter Crowder, an old negro, was found in an out-of-the-way place where he had been frozen to death during the recent cold snap."—*Macon Telegraph*.

"Dies from Exposure — Spartanburg, S. C., February 6.

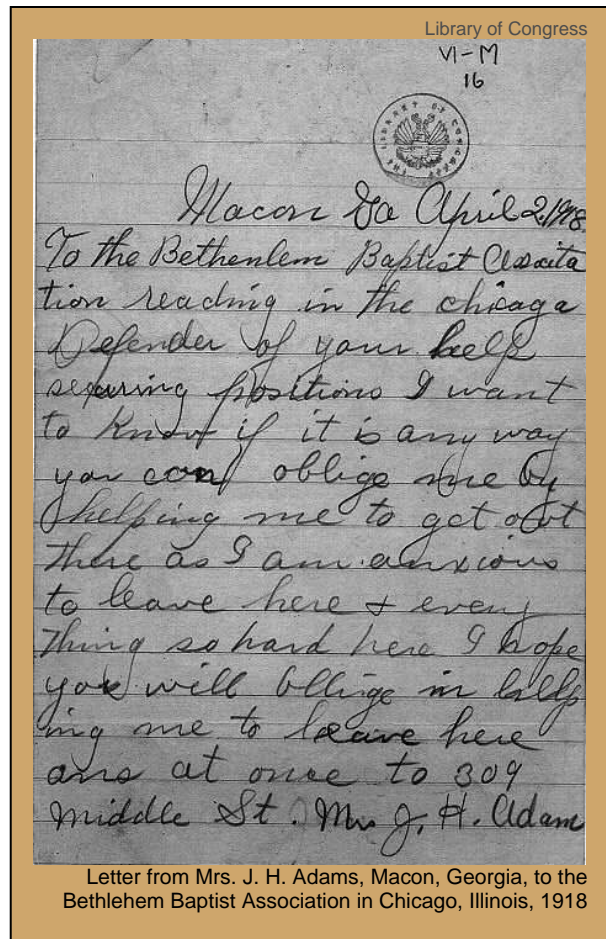
"Marshall Jackson, a negro man, who lived on the farm of J. T. Harris near Campobello, Sunday night froze to death."—*South Carolina State*.

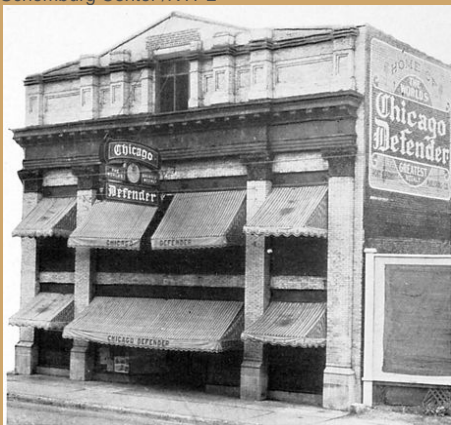
"Negro Frozen to Death in Fireless Gretna Hut.

"Coldest weather in the last four years claimed a victim Friday night, when Archie Williams, a negro, was frozen to death in his bed in a little hut in the outskirts of Gretna."—*New Orleans Item*, February 4.

"Negro Woman Frozen to Death Monday.

"Harriet Tolbert, an aged negro woman, was frozen to death in her home at 18 Garibaldi Street early Monday morning during the severe cold."—*Atlanta Constitution*, February 6.





The above is a picture of the home of the Chicago Defender, rightly called "The World's Greatest Weekly," located at 3435 Indiana Avenue, Chicago, Ill. The insert is a splendid likeness of Robert S. Abbott, founder and publisher of this great newspaper, the circulation of which has grown to the immense number of 225,000 copies weekly with an estimated total of 1,200,000 readers for each edition. The Chicago Defender is the greatest achievement in the history of the Race in journalism.

Simms' Blue Book and National Negro Business and Professional Directory, 1923

If you can freeze to death in the North and be free, why freeze to death in the South and be a slave, where your mother, sister and daughter are raped and burned at the stake; where your father, brother and sons are treated with contempt and hung to a pole, riddled with bullets at the least mention that he does not like the way he is treated. Come North then, all you folks, both good and bad. If you don't behave yourselves up here, the jails will certainly make you wish you had. For the hard-working man there is plenty of work — if you really want it. The *Defender* says come.⁷

The idea that the South is a bad place, unfit for the habitation of colored folk, was duly emphasized. Conditions most distasteful to negroes were exaggerated and given first prominence. In this the *Defender* had a clear field, for the local colored newspapers dared not make such unrestrained utterances.⁸ In fact, reading the *Chicago Defender* provided a very good substitute for the knowledge which comes through travel. It had the advantage of bringing the North to them. Without fear of exaggeration it is safe to say its policy was successful in inciting thousands of restless negroes to venture north, where they were assured of its protection and the championship of their cause. There are in Chicago migrants who attribute their presence in the North to its encouraging pictures of relief from conditions at home with which they became more and more dissatisfied, as they read.

⁷ Articles such as the following kept alive the spirit of the exodus:

"Tampa, Florida, January 19. J. T. King, supposed to be a race leader, is using his wits to get on the good side of the white people by calling a meeting to urge our people not to migrate north. King has been termed a 'good nigger' by his pernicious activity on the emigration question. Reports have been received here that all who have gone north are at work and pleased with the splendid conditions in the North. It is known here that in the North there is a scarcity of labor; mills and factories are open to them. People are not paying any attention to King and are packing and ready to travel north to the 'promised land.'"

"Jackson, Miss., March 23. J. H. Thomas, Birmingham, Alabama, Brownsville Colony, has been here several weeks and is very much pleased with the North. He is working at the Pullman Shops, making twice as much as he did at home. Mr. Thomas says the 'exodus' will be greater later on in the year, that he did not find four feet of snow or would freeze to death. He lives at 346 East Thirty-fifth St."

"Huntsville, Alabama, January 19. Fifteen families, all members of the race, left here today for Pittsburgh, Pa., where they will take positions as butlers and maids, getting sixty to seventy-five dollars a month against fifteen and twenty paid here. Most of them claim that they have letters from their friends who went early and made good saying that there was plenty of work, and this field of labor is short owing to the vast amount of men having gone to Europe and not returned."

"Shreveport, La., April 13. The Business Men's League held a meeting here and the white daily papers reported that it was for the purpose of discouraging people from going north. The meeting had no such object. On the other hand, members of the race claim that on May 15th they will be found leaving with the great northern drive."

"The northern invasion has already started, much earlier than predicted. Many members of the race refused to wait until spring. They have started despite the snow and cold. Last week thirty-one came here from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and said they intended to stay. They were well clothed, having heavy overcoats and rubber overshoes."

"Memphis, Tenn., June 1. Your correspondent took a walk to Central station Saturday night just to see what was going on, and to his surprise and delight, he saw gathered there between 1,500 and 2,000 race men and women. Number 4, due to leave for Chicago at 8:00 o'clock, was held up twenty minutes so that those people who hadn't purchased tickets might be taken aboard. It was necessary to add two additional eighty-foot steel coaches to the Chicago train in order to accommodate the race people, and at the lowest calculation there were more than 1,200 taken aboard."

"St. Louis, Mo., May 11. The *Defender* propaganda to leave sections of the South where they find conditions intolerable is receiving a hearty response. A communication was received by a *Defender* representative last week from Houston, Texas, asking for information relative to conditions in this city and the writer stated a number of persons were planning to leave Houston for this city later on. The information was promptly and cheerfully given."

"Tallulah, La., January 19. This time it's a professor. Heretofore it has been the preachers who have been paid by the white men of the South to tell our people that the North is no place for them. A bigger lie never was uttered. But now it is a professor. He is licking the white man's hand to hold a little \$35 job as a backwoods school teacher. He got his name in the papers (white) as 'good nigger.' Just because this 'would-be professor' has been making speeches, asking that our people remain here and be treated like dogs, they are starting a crusade north, and by Easter there will not be one left to tell the tale."

⁸ "Forest City, Ark., February 16. David B. Smith (white) is on trial for life for the brutal murder of a member of the race, W. H. Winford, who refused to be whipped like others. This white man had the habit of making his 'slave' submit to this sort of punishment and when Winford refused to stand for it, he was whipped to death with a 'black snake' whip. The trial of Smith is attracting very little attention. As a matter of fact, the white people here think nothing of it as the dead man is a 'nigger.' This very act, coupled with other recent outrages that have been heaped upon our people, are causing thousands to leave, not waiting for the great spring movement in May."

The setting of a definite date was another stimulus. The great northern drive was scheduled to begin May 15, 1917. This date, or the week following, singularly corresponds with the date of the heaviest rush to the North, the periods of greatest temporary congestion and the awakening of the North to the presence of their guests. Letters to the *Chicago Defender* and to the social agencies in the North informed them that they were preparing to come in the great drive. One of many such letters received is presented.

April 24, 1917.

MR. R. S. ABBOTT,
Editor, the *Chicago Defender*,

Sir:

I have been reading the *Defender* for one year or more, and last February I read about the great northern drive to take place May 15, on Thursday, and now I can hear so many people speaking of an excursion to the North on the 15th of May for \$3. My husband is in the North already working, and he wants us to come up in May, so I want to know if it is true about the excursion. I am getting ready and, oh, so many others also, and we want to know is that true so we can be in the drive. So please answer at once. We are getting ready.

Yours,

This was perhaps the most popular date, but there were others, of which August 15 was one. Usually the dates set were for Wednesday and Saturday nights, following pay days.

Personal appeals in the form of letters have a recognized weight in influencing action. The United States mail was about the most active and efficient labor agent. The manner in which the first negroes left made great opportunities for letter writing. It is to be remembered that the departure of one person was regarded always in the light of an experiment. The understanding existed between a man and his friends that he would honestly inform them of conditions in the North. Letters were passed around and read before large groups. A woman from Hattiesburg is accredited with having sent back a letter which enticed away over 200 persons. A tailor who had settled in a town of white people in the West wrote a letter which was read in a church. It explained the advantages of the free schools open to all, and the privilege to ride and to go where one pleases. The reading of the letter brought forth long and loud applause. A man who had left home, writes back to his friend yet undecided

Mike, old boy, I was promoted on the first of the month. I was made first assistant to the head carpenter. When he is out of place I take everything in charge and was raised to \$95 per month. You know I know my stuff. What's the news generally around H'burg? I should have been here twenty years ago. I just begin to feel like a man. It's a great deal of pleasure in knowing that you have got some privileges. My children are going to the same school with the whites and I don't have to humble to no one. I have registered. Will vote the next election and there isn't any 'yes, sir, and no, sir.' It's all yes and no, and no, Sam, and Bill.

The man has long since been joined by his friend.

The pastor of a Hattiesburg church received a letter from one of his members with the extravagant assertion that the people whose funerals he had preached were in Chicago (meaning Heaven) because they were good Christians. To give assurance on the question of weather migrants in the North would mention the fact that they were writing with their coats off. A fact which strengthened the



belief in the almost incredible wages offered in the North was the money sent back to the families in the South. A man whose wife had preceded him wrote that she was making \$3.50 a day in charge of a bluing works in Chicago, and actually sent home \$15 every two weeks. Another man wrote that he was in Gary working at his trade making sometimes as much as \$7 a day. He sent home \$30 every two weeks. Fully one-half, or perhaps even more of those who left, did so at the solicitation of friends through correspondence.⁹

Despite the restraints on loose talk in encouragement of the exodus, there were other means of keeping the subject alive. One method, of course, was the circulation of literature from the North. One of the most novel schemes was that of a negro dentist in a southern town who had printed on the reverse side of his business cards quotations from rather positive assertions by northerners on the migration.¹⁰ The northern press early welcomed the much needed negro laborers to the North and leaders of thought in that section began to upbraid the South for its antagonistic attitude towards the welfare of the negroes, who at last had learned to seek a more congenial home.

A stronger influence than this, though not quite so frequent, was the returned migrant who was a living example of the prosperity of the North. It was a frequent complaint that these men were as effective as labor agents in urging negro laborers to go north. There are reported numerous instances of men who came to visit their families and returned with thirty to forty men. It has been suspected, and with a strong suggestion of truth, that many of these were supplied with funds for the trip by the northern firms which employed them. A woman

whose daughter had gone north had been talking of her daughter's success. The reports were so opposite to the record of the girl at home that they were not taken seriously. Soon, however, the daughter came home with apparently unlimited money and beautiful clothes, and carried her mother back with her. This

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Average monthly salaries of colored teachers in the public schools as compared with the whites for the same period.¹

Year	Whites		Colored	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1905	\$32.39.....	\$28.77.....	\$27.78.....	\$23.02.....
1906	47.78.....	30.28.....	28.53.....	23.80.....
1907	50.91.....	32.59.....	29.29.....	25.27.....
1908	48.54.....	38.37.....	30.87.....	27.76.....
1909	54.09.....	40.27.....	30.44.....	27.20.....
1910	56.90.....	40.96.....	31.25.....	27.75.....
1911	61.44.....	41.72.....	32.19.....	26.85.....
1912	63.30.....	43.31.....	32.24.....	26.88.....
1913	66.03.....	44.82.....	36.77.....	30.21.....
1914	69.75.....	44.16.....	34.38.....	29.73.....
1915	72.91.....	46.10.....	34.15.....	30.70.....
1916	73.77.....	48.29.....	36.08.....	31.73.....
1917	76.03.....	48.98.....	38.20.....	31.72.....

Table in William Henry Brown, *The Education and Economic Development of the Negro in Virginia*, ca. 1923

⁹ Johnson, *Report on the Migration from Mississippi*.

¹⁰ "There is no class of people and no ethical question that will not feel the effects of the war. The negroes of this country who go to France to fight, or who replace workingmen who go as soldiers will demand, and justly so, full American rights. The United States can not stand before the world as the champion of freedom and democracy and continue to burn men alive and lynch them without fair trial. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People calls upon this country to 'clear her conscience before she can fight for the world's good,' by abolishing lynching and ceasing all oppression of negroes. This is a national problem and more particularly one of the South. In Europe there are practically no race distinctions. A negro can mix with white folk as an equal, just as a Spaniard, for example, does here; even intermarriage is not regarded as miscegenation. The race problem here is a different matter, however, as even the more intelligent negroes themselves will acknowledge. The negro should be assured all the protection and rights that go with American citizenship, but in this is not involved intermarriage or social equality."—*Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, October 13, 1917.

"The foreign laborer has been called home to bear arms for his country. The daily death toll and waste and the recently enacted immigration law make it certain that he will not soon return in great numbers. As a result a large market exists for the negro laborer in localities in which he would have been considered an impudent trespasser had he attempted to enter a few years ago. The history of the world from the days of Moses to the present shows that where one race has been subjugated, oppressed or proscribed by another and exists in large numbers, permanent relief has come in one or two ways — amalgamation or migration. The thought of amalgamation is not to be entertained. If conditions in the South for the colored man are to be permanently improved, many of those who now live there should migrate and scatter throughout the North, East and West. I believe the present opportunity providential."—Hon. John C. Ashbury, Philadelphia Bar.

"This is the psychological moment to say to the American white government from every pulpit and platform and through every newspaper, 'Yes, we are loyal and patriotic. Boston Common, Bunker Hill, Gettysburg, Fort Pillow, Appomattox, San Juan Hill and Carrizal will testify to our loyalty. While we love our flag and country, we do not believe in fighting for the protection of commerce on the high seas until the powers that be give us at least some verbal assurance that the property and lives of the members of our race are going to be protected on land from Maine to Mississippi.' Let us have the courage to say to the white American people, 'Give us the same rights which you enjoy, and then we will fight by your side with all of our might for every international right on land and sea.' If this kind of talk is not loyalty, then I am disloyal; if this is not patriotism, then I am unpatriotic; if this is treason, then I am a traitor. It is not that I love Cæsar less, but these black Romans more, who have been true to the flag for two hundred and fifty years. It is infinitely more disgraceful and outrageous to hang and burn colored men, boys and women without a trial in the times of peace than it is for Germans in times of war to blow up ships loaded with mules and molasses."—Reverend A. Clayton Powell, New York, N. Y.

was sufficient. It was remarked afterwards: "If she can make \$2.50 a day as lazy as she was, I know I can make \$4."¹¹

The labor agents were a very important factor in stimulating the movement. The number at work in the South appears to have been greatly exaggerated. Agents were more active in large cities where their presence was not so conspicuous. It was difficult to discover because of the very guarded manner in which they worked. One, for example, would walk briskly down the street through a group of negroes and, without turning his head, would say in a low tone, "Anybody want to go to Chicago, see me." That was sufficient. Many persons were found to remark frequently on the strange silence which negroes *en masse* managed to maintain concerning the movement of the agents. A white man remarked that it was the first time there had ever happened anything about which he could not get full information from some negro. Agents were reported, at one time or another, in every section from which the migrants went. When the vigilance of the authorities restricted their activities they began working through the mails. Many sections were flooded with letters from the North to persons whose names had been obtained from migrants in the North or through a quiet canvass of the community by unobstructed solicitors.¹²

Poems on the migration were also strong stimuli. In some instances arrests of persons circulating them were made. A bit of poetry which received widespread popularity was one called "Bound for the Promised Land." It was said that this piece of poetry was responsible for much trouble. The *Chicago Defender* reported on June 1, 1917, that five young men were arraigned before Judge John E. Schwartz of Savannah, Georgia, for reading poetry. The police contended that they were inciting riot in the city and over Georgia. Two of the men were sent for thirty days to Brown Farm, a place not fit for human beings. Tom Amaca was arrested for having "Bound for the Promised Land," a poem which had been recently published in the *Defender*. J. N. Chisholm and A. P. Walker were arrested there because they were said to be the instigators.¹³ Another very popular poem widely circulated was entitled "Farewell! We're Good and Gone." It was said that this poem influenced thousands to go. Other poems on the migration were "Northward Bound," "The Land of Hope" and "Negro Migration" and "The Reason Why."

CHAPTER IV

The Spread of the Movement

In the first communities visited by representatives of northern capital, their offers created unprecedented commotion. Drivers and teamsters left their wagons standing in the street. Workers, returning home, scrambled aboard the trains for the North without notifying their employers or their families. The crowds that blackened the pool rooms and "hangouts" faded away as the trains continued to leave. Wild rumors about the North crept into circulation and received unquestioning credence. Songs about Pennsylvania, the spontaneous expression of anxiety and joy over the sudden revelation of a new world, floated about on the lips of the children. Homes were thrown on the market and sold at ruinously low prices.

It was observed that the beginnings in each new community exhibited the same characteristics. This is due in part to a pretty universal state of unrest among negroes throughout the South. Although the first



African Americans in the segregated waiting room of the Jacksonville, Florida, railroad station, 1921

¹¹ Johnson, *Report on the Migration from Mississippi*.

¹² [Monroe N.] Work and [Charles S.] Johnson, *Report on the Migration during the World War*. [n.d.]

¹³ Ibid.

State entered by representatives of northern capital was Florida, their efforts were not confined to that commonwealth. And again, although the Pennsylvania and Erie Railroads were the first to import negroes in large numbers, they were not alone in the field very long. The steel mills of the East and the railroads of the West soon followed — each selecting States from which egress was easy and convenient. The authorities of the cities of Florida, when they began to engage themselves in the suppression of recruiting agents, succeeded in scattering them to other fields where their mere presence, preceded as it was by the news of their mission in the South, was sufficient to attract, first, all of the landless labor, then to loosen the steady workman wedded to the soil, and finally to carry away the best of the working classes. Quite naturally southeastern Georgia was the second district to feel the drain of the exodus. These workers were carried into Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey for the maintenance work of the roads. North Carolina was next entered; then finally Virginia which had been sending many negroes into New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey for a number of years.¹⁴

Numerous illustrations show the popular state of mind at the beginning, when every one was feverish. Men would loudly decry the folly of breaking up their homes, the result of years of unrelenting toil, and venturing into the unknown North, and within less than twenty-four hours, would leave themselves. A good citizen would talk with another about the apparent insanity of those negroes who had “contracted the northern fever.” They would condemn their acts with their strongest words. Hardly before another day could pass, one of the two would disappear, having imitated the recklessness of the very people he had so recently condemned.

One man in telling of how they acted, asserts “You could see a man today and he would be calling the people who were leaving all kinds of names; he could even beat you when it came to calling them fools for going north. The next day when you met him he wouldn’t talk so loud and the next day he wouldn’t let you see him. That would be the last of him, because, unless you went to the depot, you wouldn’t see him again. Whenever I saw them shying off from me, I always knew what they had up their sleeves.” It was “just naturally fashionable” to leave for the North. A man would make up his mind to go and proceed forthwith to persuade his friends. If they refused, they no longer had any interests in common. In talking with a man who had persistently refused to leave, he declared that he had lost practically every friend he had, simply because he did not agree with them on “the northern question.” For the pastors of churches it was a most trying ordeal. They must watch their congregations melt away and could say nothing. If they spoke in favor of the movement, they were in danger of a clash with the authorities. If they discouraged it, they were accused of being bought up to hold negroes in bondage. If a pastor attempted to persuade negroes to stay, his congregation and his collection would be cut down and in some cases his resignation demanded. In some of the smaller communities the pastors settled this difficulty by following their flock, as was the case of three who left Hattiesburg, Mississippi, following their congregations. Two lumber companies in Mississippi employed a negro to lecture for the purpose of discouraging the exodus. He was handsomely paid, but he was unheeded. Even now he is held in contempt by his former friends.



Chicago Urban League building, in *The Negro in Chicago* (Chicago Commission on Race Relations), 1922

¹⁴ Work, *Report on the Migration from Florida*. [n.d.]



"Upholstering. Most of the Negro employes who are making good in the coarser indoor trades, such as upholstering, are recent arrival in Chicago," in John Taitt, *Souvenir of Negro Progress: Chicago, 1779-1925*, 1925



"Negro girls and women employed in a lamp-shade factory: work-room is poorly lighted and generally unattractive," in Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago and The Race Riots*, 1922

The devout and religious saw God in the movement. It was inspired, they said, else why could so many thousand negroes all be obsessed at once with the same impulse. There were set afloat rumors that a great calamity was about to befall the Southland. In Georgia and Alabama, hundreds believed that God had cursed the land when he sent droughts and floods and destructive pests to visit them. The number of negroes needed in the North was counted in millions; the wages offered were fabulous and the letters that came from the vanguard painted pictures of a land of plenty. From some communities a small group would leave, promising to inform those behind of the actual state of affairs. For a week or more there would follow a tense period of "watchful waiting" and never ending anxiety, when finally there would arrive a card bearing the terse report "Everything pritty," or "Home ain't nothing like this." On this assurance, a reckless disposition of household effects would follow.¹⁵

The towns quite naturally were the first to feel the effect. There, the pass rider — the labor agent — could move about more freely. People lived in closer contact and news circulated more rapidly; the papers came in regularly and the negroes themselves could

see those leaving. On market days when the country folk reached town they got their first impulse from the commotion. Young country boys failed to return to quiet isolation, and sturdy sensible farmers whose whole lives had been spent on the farm, could not resist the temptation. As they returned they informed their neighbors, saying: "They are leaving town by the thousands," or "Man, colored folks are leaving in droves for the North." There are cases of men who left their fields half plowed and journeyed to the city and thence to the North. In other communities, the beginning would be a timid dribble to the larger cities or directly to the North.¹⁶

The state of mind of the community under the influence of the first effects of the "fever" is illustrated in authenticated accounts of persons who witnessed the exodus from different cities:

The most interesting thing is how these people left. They were selling out everything they had or in a manner giving it away; selling their homes, mules, horses, cows, and everything about them but their trunks. All around in the country, people who were so old they could not very well get about were leaving. Some left with six to eight very small children and babies half clothed, no shoes on their feet, hungry, not anything to eat and not even a cent over their train fare. Some would go to the station and wait there three or four days for an agent who was carrying them on passes. Others of this city would go in clubs of fifty and a hundred at a time in order to get reduced rates. They usually left on Wednesday and Saturday nights. One Wednesday night I went to the station to see a friend of mine who was leaving. I could not get in the station, there were so many people turning like bees in a hive. Officers would go up and down the tracks trying to keep the people back. One old lady and man had gotten on the train. They were patting their feet

¹⁵ Work and Johnson, *Report on the Migration during the World War*.

¹⁶ *The Chicago Defender*, 1916, 1917.

and singing and a man standing nearby asked, "Uncle, where are you going?" The old man replied, "Well son, I'm gwine to the promised land."¹⁷

"When the laboring man got paid off," said a Jackson, Mississippi, man, "he bought himself a suit of overalls and a paper valise and disappeared." Even the young married women refused to wait any longer than the time required to save railroad fare. It's strange that when a negro got a notion to leave and he could not sell or give away, he simply locked up his house and left the key with his neighbor. Families with \$1,000 worth of furniture have been known to sell it for \$150. A Negro in Jackson was buying a \$1,000 house, on which he had paid \$700. When the "fever" struck the town, he sold it for \$100 and left.

There was related this instance of a number of negro laborers:

On a plantation in south Georgia, where fifteen or more families were farming as tenants, there had been a great deal of confusion and suffering among the people because of the lack of sufficient food and clothing. There were the Joneses, a family of nine, the Harrisons, a family of ten, and the Battles, a family of six. No family on the place had an allowance of more than \$25 per month for food and clothing. When this allowance gave out, nothing could be gotten until the next month and the tenants dared not leave their farms to work elsewhere. The owner of this plantation lived in town ten miles away and only visited the farm about once a week. Much to his surprise, on one of his weekly visits he found all the homes and farms deserted except one. On that were two old men, Uncle Ben and Uncle Joe, who had been left behind because there were unable to secure passes. Uncle Ben and Uncle Joe sorrowfully told the landlord all that

¹⁷ "Whether he knew what he was going for or not," says one, "he did not take time to consider. The slogan was 'going north.' Some never questioned the whys or wherefores but went; led as if, by some mysterious unseen hand which was compelling them on, they just couldn't stay. One old negro when asked why he was leaving, replied: 'I don't know why or where I'm going, but I'm on my way.' The northern fever was just simply contagious; they couldn't help themselves. So far as I know, and I think I am about right, this fever started in and around the vicinity of Bessemer, Alabama. One little village, especially, there was owned by a white man from my home who had gone there the year before carrying some negroes with him. The negroes started leaving this village so fast that he wouldn't allow any more tickets to be sold in this village, but the negroes only scoffed at this. They left the plantations at night and went to other villages for tickets. The fever had now begun and, like all other contagious diseases, it soon spread. I arrived home on May 4 and found my native town all in a bustle. Now, what was it all about? The next club for the North was leaving on May 18. The second-hand furniture store and junk shop were practically overflowing. People were selling out valuable furniture such as whole bedroom sets for only \$2. One family that I knew myself sold a beautiful expensive home for only \$100. In fact people almost gave away their houses and furnishings. Finally, the night for the club to leave came and the crowds at the train were so large that the policemen had to just force them back in order to allow the people to get on and off. After the train was filled with as many people as it could hold, the old engine gave one or two puffs and pulled out, bound for the promised land."

"A very close neighbor of ours," says one, "left for the North. He had a very small family. He left because his youngest son, who had been north a few months, came home with a considerable amount of money which he had saved while on his trip. The father made haste and sold all he had. His son got him a pass. He said it was far better for him to be in the North where he could stand up like a man and demand his rights; so he is there. His daughter Mary remained at home for some time after the family had gone. She finally wrote her father to send her a pass, which he did. She had a small boy that was given her. She was not able to take him and care for him as she would like. Her next door neighbor, a very fine woman who had no children, wanted a child so Mary gave it to her. To secure better wages and more freedom his oldest son went to East St. Louis and remained there until June. Then he left for Chicago. This family sold their chickens and rented their cattle to some of the people in that community."—Work and Johnson, *Report on the Migration during the World War*.

Univ. of Illinois at Chicago Library



Newly arrived African Americans exiting the train station in Chicago, Illinois, 1921

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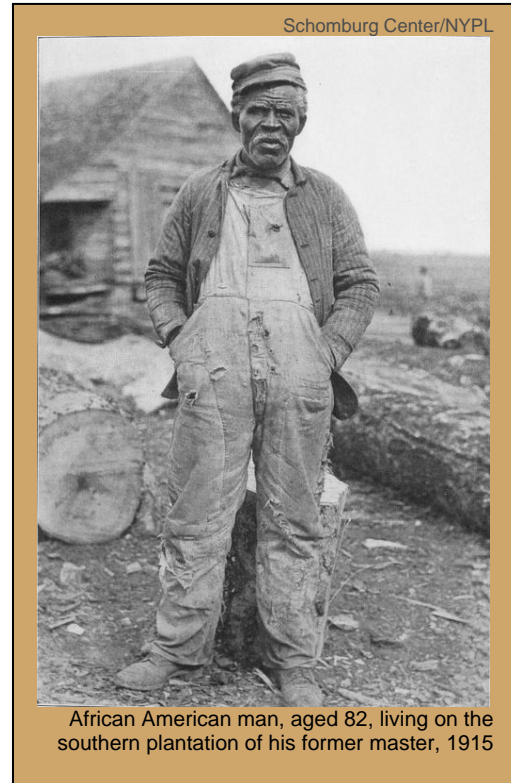
Card distributed to black migrants arriving from the South

had happened, emphasizing the fact that they were the only ones who had remained loyal to him. Then they told him their needs. The landlord, thinking that the old negroes were so faithful, rewarded them with a good sum of money and left with the assurance that they would see to the crops being worked. No sooner had the landlord left than these old men with grips packed and with the money they had received, boarded the train to join their companions in the North.¹⁸

As an example of the irresistible force which characterized the movement, one old negro made the remark: "I sorter wanted to go myself. I didn't know just where I wanted to go. I just wanted to git away with the rest of them." A woman in speaking of the torture of solitude which she experienced after the first wave passed over her town, said: "You could go out on the street and count on your fingers all the colored people you saw during the entire day. Now and then a disconsolate looking Italian storekeeper would come out in the street, look up and down and walk back. It was a sad looking place, and so quiet it gave you the shivers."¹⁹

In the heat of the excitement families left carrying members dangerously ill. There is reported one interesting case of a family with one of its members sick with pneumonia. As soon as the woman was able to sit up, she was carried away. At St. Louis it was found necessary to stop because of her condition. Finding that she could not recover, they proceeded to Chicago, where she died. Several of the migrants have seen fit to make heroes of themselves by declining to return to the South even on the advice of a physician. Thus, a certain minister is said to have refused to be sent home when his physician had told him there was a possible chance for recovery in his home in the South. He said that he preferred to die and be buried in the North.

By the summer of 1916, the exodus from Florida had grown to such ungovernable bounds that the more stable classes of negroes became unsettled. A body, representing the influential colored citizens of the State, wrote the editor of the *New York Age*:²⁰



JACKSONVILLE, FLA., August 10, 1916.

To the Editor of the *Age*:

To be brief, I beg to state that the (——) of this city, in a regular meeting, voted last Monday that I write your paper asking advice on the subject of migration which is large and really alarming to the people of this State, for thousands of people (colored) are leaving this State, going to Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland and New Jersey, where it is stated that they are wanted as laborers in various pursuits. in your mind and to your knowledge, do you think it is the best thing for them to do, and are they bettering condition financially, morally and religiously; even in manhood, citizenship, etc. Our —— has been asked by the white and colored people here to speak in an advisory way, but we decided to remain silent until we can hear from reliable sources in the North and East and you have been designated as one of the best. So to speak, our city is in a turmoil — in suspense. You have doubtless heard of the great exodus of negroes to the North, and we presume you have given it some thought, and even investigate it. Please give the benefit of your findings and reasons for you conclusion.

Thanking you in advance for a prompt and full reply to the corresponding secretary,

Yours truly,

Corresponding Secretary.



¹⁸ Work and Johnson, *Report on the Migration during the World War*.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰ *The New York Age*, August 16, 1916.

Caught up in the wave of enthusiasm that swept over the South, these migrants could not resist the impulse to leave. The economic loss resulting from their reckless departure expressed in terms of dollars and cents is another story, and probably can never be even approximately estimated. What seems of most interest here is that they were in the frame of mind for leaving. They left as though they were fleeing some curse; they were willing to make almost any sacrifice to obtain a railroad ticket and they left with the intention of staying. What has been described, of course, can not be construed to apply to every one who left. There were those of the business and professional classes who were promoted by other motives than those which impelled the masses of migrants. There were, for example, migrants who in the South had held positions of relatively high standing by virtue of the fact that there do exist two institutional standards, the white and the black. Measured by the requirements of the latter, they stood high in the respect of the community, but when removed to the North they suffered in the rank of their occupation. A college president or even a school teacher had little opportunity in their respective fields in the North. They had, therefore, migrated because deserted by their neighbors they were left with a prospect of a diminishing social importance.

Schomburg Center/NYPL

R. H. MCGAVOCK Res., 4528 Forestville Ave.

R. H. McGavock was born in Nashville, Tenn., and it was there that he received his early education, mastered the Carpenter's Trade under the supervision of his father, has resided in Chicago for the past twenty years. At one time he was engaged in the Teaming and Restaurant Business and was very successful in both.

He went into the Undertaking Business in 1915, and has become one of the most popular and successful undertakers of the Northwest, having built up a tremendously large business. It has been said by those in position to know that his establishment is the finest and most modern equipped establishment in America, among our race group.

As a fraternal man Mr. McGavock is identified with the Elks, United Brothers of Friendship, Ancient Order of Forresters, Knights of Pythias, the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, and is a 32 degree Mason and Shriner.

Mr. McGavock is a very strong supporter of the Urban League, a member of the Young Men's Christian Association, member of the Inter-denominational Ministers' Alliance, and one of the most popular local church men of Chicago.

In addition to this he is the proud father of two sons and four daughters.

Simms' Blue Book and National Negro Business and Professional Directory, 1923

Professional men followed their practice. In Chicago there are at least six lawyers from Mississippi, with practically the same clientele. At the height of the exodus, one of these came to Chicago and secured admission to the bar in order that he might be in a position to move quickly if his practice were too severely cut down. Several physicians of the State have remarked that they would now be in the East or the North if reciprocity with the State of Mississippi were possible.²¹ Business men have been reported to have moved North for the sole purpose of collecting debts. Others are cooler and more calculating in preparing to leave. One pharmacist, for instance, plans to move within the next five years. It is true that some of those who came in the movement would have come even if no one else had decided to migrate. The influence of the general state of mind, however, on the great majority is of most concern in determining the forces behind the exodus.

Possibly the numbers to leave the South would have been considerably smaller had there not been existent so universal a readiness to respond to a call in almost any direction. The causes of this state of mind are stated elsewhere. What is important here is the behavior of the persons leaving which exerted such a compelling influence on their neighbors. The actions are illustrative not only of the contagion of the movement, but of the fundamental emotions of

the negroes who formed the exodus. Thus it was, for example, that the movement was called the "exodus" from its suggestive resemblance to the flight of the Israelites from Egypt, *The Promised Land*, *Crossing over Jordan* (the Ohio River), and *Beulah Land*. At times demonstrations took on a rather spectacular aspect, as when a party of 147 from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, while crossing the Ohio River, held solemn ceremonies. These migrants knelt down and prayed; the men stopped their watches and, amid tears of joy, sang the familiar songs of deliverance, "I done come out of the Land of Egypt with the good news." The

²¹ Johnson, *Report on the Migration from Mississippi*.

songs following in order were “Beulah Land” and “Dwelling in Beulah Land.” One woman of the party declared that she could detect an actual difference in the atmosphere beyond the Ohio River, explaining that it was much lighter and that she could get her breath more easily.²²

The general direction of the spread of the movement was from east to west. While efforts were being made to check the exodus from Florida, the good citizens of Texas were first beginning to note a stir of unrest in their sections. On the other hand, the march of the boll weevil, that stripped the cotton fields of the South, was from west to east. Where there was wide unemployment, depression and poverty as a result of the great floods in Alabama, the cutting down of the [sugar] cane area in Louisiana, the boll weevil in Mississippi, there were to be found thousands who needed no other inducement save the prospect of a good job. Indeed, it is alleged by some negroes that the myriads of labor agents who were said to be operating in the South were creatures of the imagination of an affrighted Southland; that but few were actually offering positions in the North; but their success was due to the overpowering desire on the part of the negroes to go.²³

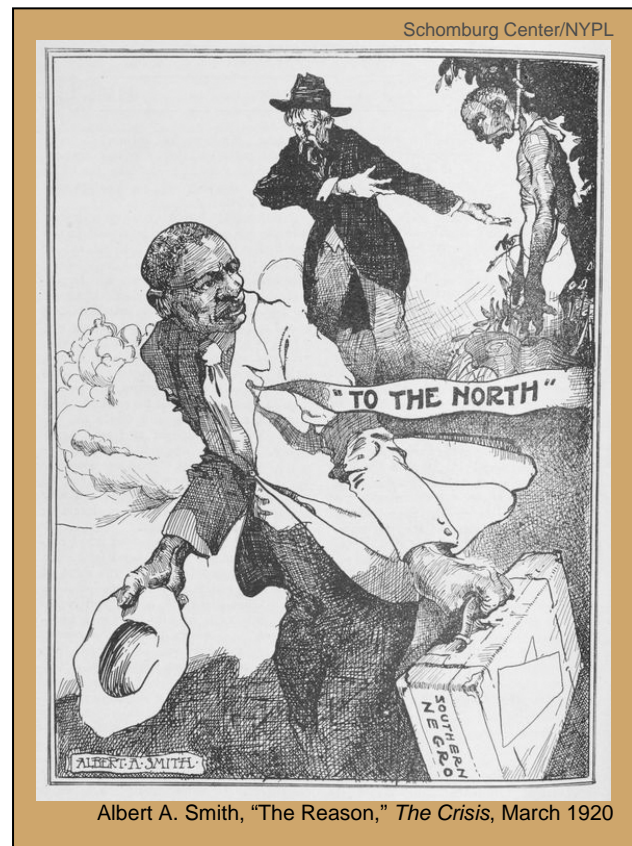
In September of 1916 a Georgia correspondent of the *Atlantic Constitution* wrote:

For the past two or three weeks I have been receiving two or more letters daily from people in all sections of Georgia asking my advice as to the advisability of the colored people leaving the State in large numbers, as they have been leaving for the past six months. I think it is a mistake for our people to sell and practically give their earnings of years just on a hearsay that they will be given larger salaries and great advantages in some other part of the country.

It will be remembered that the State of South Carolina was not immediately affected. It was not until the discussions bearing on the negro's insecurity and economic state, which accompanied the exodus in justification of it, had begun to be emphasized as the cause of the movement that a great exodus took place in the State. The principal occasion here was the unfortunate lynching of Anthony Crawford. A negro newspaper with a correspondent in Abbeville said:

The lynching of Anthony Crawford has caused men and women of this State to get up and bodily leave it. The lynching of Mr. Crawford was unwarranted and uncalled for and his treatment was such a disgrace that respectable people are leaving daily. When they begin to leave in the next few weeks like they have planned, this section will go almost into hysterics as some sections of Georgia and Alabama are doing because they are leaving for the North to better their industrial condition. Crawford is said to have been worth \$100,000 in property. His wife and five sons have been ordered to leave. Word comes that neighbors are beginning to leave and the number the first of the week reached 1,000. The cry now is — “Go north, where there is some humanity, some justice and fairness.” White people have accelerated the movement for the race to move north.

This, however, accounts principally for the spread of the movement as accomplished by northern capital which, hitting the South in spots, made it possible for a wider dissemination of knowledge concerning the North, and actually placed in the North persons with numerous

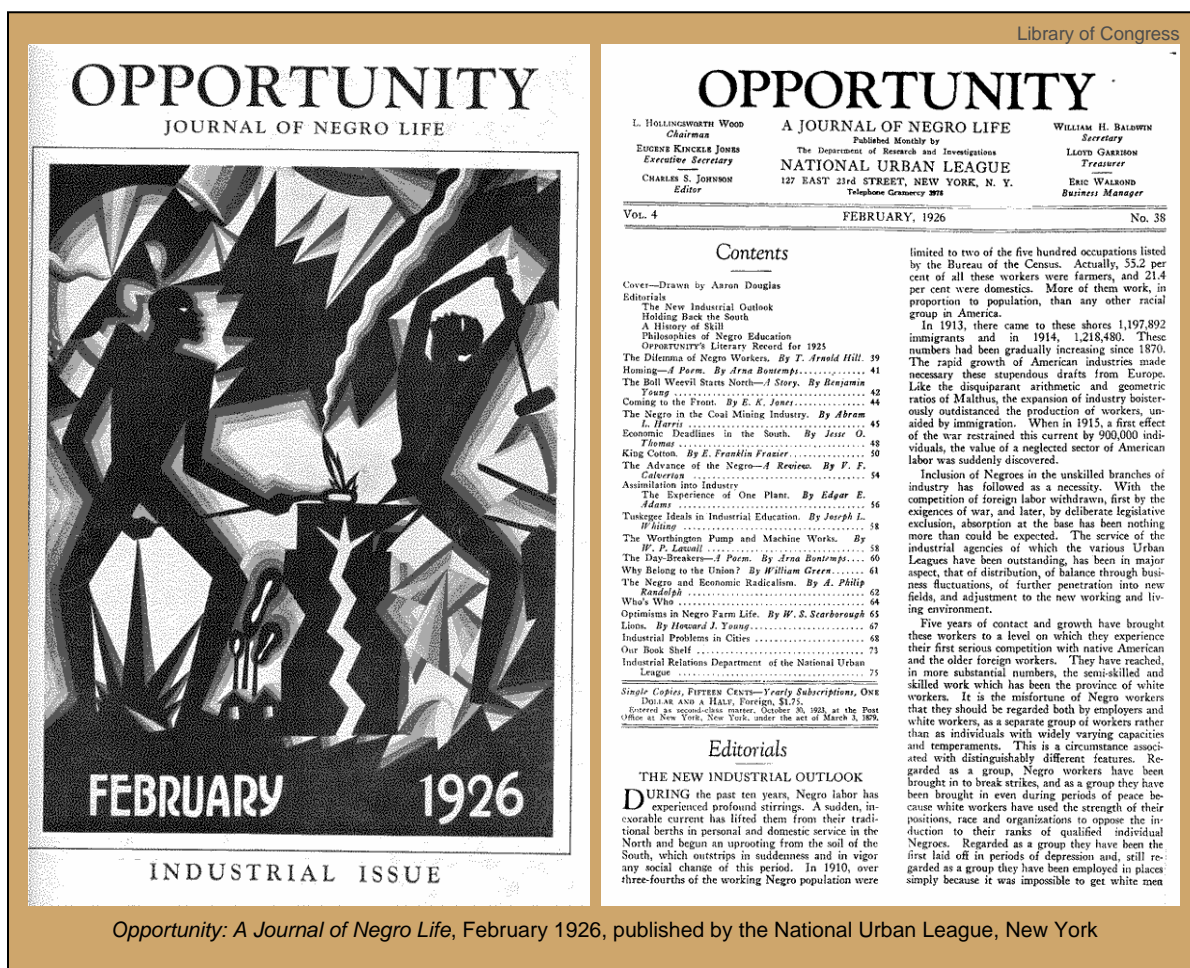


²² Johnson, *Report on the Migration from Mississippi*.

²³ Work, *Report on the Migration from Alabama*.

personal connections at home. The husbands and fathers who preceded their families could and did command that they follow, and they in turn influenced their neighbors. It appears that those who came on free transportation were largely men who had no permanent interests or who could afford to venture into strange fields. This indiscriminate method of many of the transporting agencies undoubtedly made it possible for a great number of indigent and thriftless negroes simply to change the scene of their inaction. Yet it is unquestionably true that quite a large proportion of those who went North in this fashion were men honestly seeking remunerative employment, or persons who left through sheer desperation. In the second stage of the movement the club organizations, special parties and chartered cars did most perhaps to depopulate little communities and drain the towns and cities.

This is easily to be accounted for. The free trains, carrying mainly men, were uncertain. They were operated for brief periods in towns, but were in such ill favor with the police that passengers were not safe. The clubs or special parties were worked up by a leader, who was often a woman of influence. She sought her friends and a convenient date was appointed. Arrangements could also be made with friends in the North to receive them. The effectiveness of this method is seen in the fact that neighbor was soliciting neighbor and friend persuading friend. Women in some of the northern cities, joining these clubs, assert that no persuasion was needed; that if a family found that it could not leave with the first groups, it felt desolate and willing to resort to any extremes and sacrifices to get the necessary fare. One woman in a little town in Mississippi, from which over half of the negro population had dribbled away, said: "If I stay here any longer, I'll go wild. Every time I go home I have to pass house after house of all my friends who are in the North and prospering. I've been trying to hold on here and keep my little property. There ain't enough people here I now know to give me a decent burial."



Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life, February 1926, published by the National Urban League, New York