

Black Workers and the Great Migration North

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Source: *Phylon* (1960-), Vol. 46, No. 2 (2nd Qtr., 1985), pp. 148-161

Published by: [Clark Atlanta University](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/274413>

Accessed: 01-01-2016 07:59 UTC

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Black Workers and the Great Migration North

THE GREAT Migration changed forever the population distribution of blacks in the United States. Never again would there be such a concentration within a single region. Over one million, 10 percent of the black population, fled the South during the two decades, 1910 to 1930. Estimates suggest that over 400,000 left between 1910 and 1920 (see Table 1). Most of those, it is claimed, moved in the two-year period, 1916-1918. As Table 1 shows, the combined net migrations of the previous four decades were less than that of the first decade of the Great Migration. That blacks left the South at that particular time, fifty years after emancipation and in such quick succession, seems especially surprising. Traditional accounts have explained the rapid population shift in terms of a set of concurrent push-pull factors. Pushed out of the South because of the boll weevil, flooding, disenfranchisement and the rise of Jim Crow, migrants were at the same time pulled North by increased demand for their labor due to the war in Europe and the cessation of immigration, the recruitment of labor agents and the inducements of the black press.¹ According to Myrdal, "In this situation of accumulated migration potentialities [these] factors of change coincided and created a shock effect after 1915."²

TABLE 1
ESTIMATED NET INTERCENSAL MIGRATION OF
BLACKS FROM THE SOUTH — 1870-1930

Intercensal Period	South
1870-1880	-60
1880-1890	-70
1890-1900	-168
1900-1910	-170
1910-1920	-454
1920-1930	-749

Numbers in thousands. Minus sign (-) denotes net out-migration.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, Special Studies Series P-23, NO. 80, 1978, p. 15.

Yet compilation of perfectly timed, historically unique factors underlying the migration, none of which are disputed here, tell us little about those who left. Who were these 400,000 people who abandoned the land of their birth? Why did so many decide to leave at approximately the same time? How did they leave? What happened to them?

In this paper, it is suggested first that the assessment that a majority of the Great Migration migrants were from rural areas has been frequently assumed but never proved. There has not been a satisfactory answer to the question of who left. Second, while numerous investigations document a large exodus

¹ Emmett Scott, *Negro Migration During the War* (New York, 1969); Louise Kennedy, *The Negro Peasant Turns Cityward* (New York, 1930); Allan Spear, *Black Chicago* (Chicago, 1967).
² Gunnar Myrdal, *American Dilemma* (New York, 1944), p. 143.

from rural areas to Southern cities, whether the same population entered Northern communities has never been subject to verification. Third, the labor conditions resulting from a large influx of rural laborers to Southern cities are rarely discussed. What happened to existing labor in competition with the cheaper rural reserve? Fourth, black non-agricultural workers, though a relatively small percentage of the Southern work force, nonetheless represented sizeable numbers as early as 1910. How they were affected by migration inducements is generally ignored in the literature. And finally, previous assumptions about the characteristics of migrants have led to the conclusion that their lack of mobility in the North is tied to their rural backgrounds. Would a reassessment of who left create a different interpretation of what happened to them? Each of these topics will be addressed.

Who Left

Past research has neglected the question of who left because the answers, beyond gross generalizations, have been thought to be as numerous as the migrants themselves.³ Migrants are thought to represent an undifferentiated mass. Of the Great Migration it is said, for example, "People (particularly blacks) left rural areas to take jobs in towns and cities of the South and North."⁴ It has also been stated, "The areas from which the majority of the migrants came were predominately rural."⁵ Little documentation follows such assertions beyond observations such as "To the poorly-paid Southern farm hands the wages paid by Northern industries — and paid in cold cash by the week instead of in store credit once a year — seemed fabulous sums".⁶ Such observations obscure more than they reveal.

Patterns of Migration Within the South

Migratory patterns within the South prior to the Great Migration tell us much about the composition of the Southern black population. While popular views picture most as immobile before World War One, there was instead much movement within the South following emancipation. Of particular interest is the movement of farm laborers. Dissatisfied with the low remuneration for their work, between 1890 and 1910, they set in motion three migration streams.⁷ One stream advanced upon the towns in search of industrial employment, where they subsequently glutted the labor market and reduced the small earnings of those already in such jobs. Another stream migrated west to Texas and Oklahoma where regular seasonal wages were higher. A final stream migrated to the newly opened iron and coal mines in Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee.⁸

³ Daniel Price and Melanie Sykes, *Rural-Urban Migration Research in the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1974), p. 13.

⁴ Neil Fligstein, *Going North* (New York, 1981), p. 104.

⁵ Daniel Johnson and Rex Campbell, *Black Migration in America* (Durham, 1981), p. 79.

⁶ Kennedy, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

⁷ Lyonel Florant, "Negro Internal Migration," *American Sociological Review* 7 (December 1942), 784.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 785.

The volume of these movements was relatively small (see Table 2).⁹ However, it was of sufficient strength to make the black population of the South 22 percent urbanized by 1910. Nearly two million blacks lived in Southern cities at least six years before the start of the Great Migration.¹⁰ Southern cities gained even more black population after 1910. Table 2 shows that the gains of Southern cities during the first decade of the Great Migration are equal to those of the Northeast and North Central regions combined.

TABLE 2
ESTIMATES OF BLACK INTERCENSAL NET MIGRATION
FOR URBAN AND RURAL PORTIONS OF REGIONS,
1910-1920

	Northeast	North central	South	West
Black				
Urban	167	247	588	18
Rural	3	-17	-1,013	8

Number in thousands. Minus sign (-) represents net out-migration.
SOURCE: Daniel O. Price *Changing Characteristics — Negro Population* Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C., 1965.

Southern cities were increasing at an even faster rate than Northern cities were. But overshadowing the comparative gains of these cities is the fact that usually it has been assumed but never tested that the same people who left rural areas were the ones to arrive in the North. There were in Southern cities after 1910 at least three groups of likely candidates for migration: old urban residents, those residing in cities before 1890; recent urban residents, those arriving between 1890 and 1910 and newcomers; rural laborers thrown off the land by the boll weevil. The question is, "Which of these went North?" Lyonel Florant states the problem cogently: "True, large numbers of southern negroes moved (from rural areas) to nearby towns and cities, but whether or not these same individuals comprised the majority of those who later arrived in northern cities has not been subject to verification."¹¹

Florant thinks there were two segments of migrants: first those who moved from Southern farms to Southern cities, and second, those who moved from Southern to Northern cities. This view is difficult to confirm because the census did not include information on migrants beyond state of birth, sex and age until 1940. It is possible, however, to make reasonable assessments of the actual steps leading to migration from the numerous documentary accounts.

Labor Conditions

To understand who left, we must explore the composition of labor in the South just prior to the exodus. In 1910, over 60 percent of the black population was engaged in agriculture (most of that in cotton), 18 percent in domestic and

⁹ Table 4 shows a net migration of over a million blacks from the rural areas of the South. See Daniel O. Price, *Changing Characteristics — Negro Population* (Washington, D.C., 1965), p. 39.
¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
¹¹ Florant, *op. cit.*, p. 785.

personal service and only 20 percent in all other occupations combined (see Table 3). Those engaged in manufacturing and **mechanical pursuits**, a census category roughly comparable to the industrial sector, represented 9 percent of the work force. Although this figure is almost twice that of 1890, it is evident that the black population was only beginning to be industrialized in 1910.

TABLE 3
LABOR DISTRIBUTION OF THE BLACK POPULATION 10 YEARS OF
AGE AND OVER IN THE SOUTH: 1890, 1900, 1910 BY NUMBER
(IN THOUSANDS) AND PERCENT

	1890	1900	1910
Agriculture	1,703 (62)	2,062 (61)	2,847 (62)
Manufacturing	137 (5)	209 (6)	413 (9)
Transportation	110 (4)	142 (4)	184 (4)
Domestic	769 (28)	924 (27)	827 (18)
Other	27 (1)	67 (2)	321 (7)
Total	2,746	3,404	4,592

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, "The Social and Economic Status of the Black Population in the United States: An Historical View, 1790-1978," *Current Population Reports*, Special Studies Series P-23, No. 80 (Washington, D.C., 1978), p. 73.

Nevertheless, the relatively small percentage within the industrial sector did not represent a negligible number of people. In 1910, over 90 percent of the entire black population of the United States resided in the 14 states of the South. According to the census, nearly 600,000 blacks worked in manufacturing and transportation (see Table 2).¹² The migration, which was made up of both workers and their families, easily could have been populated entirely by this group.

It is perhaps surprising to argue that an employed and settled population could be drawn into moving. But the reason lies in the kind of work they did and the wages they received. In 1910, approximately 35 percent were engaged in skilled and semi-skilled trades. Some of these were from the old artisan class of slavery — blacksmiths, masons and carpenters; a small class who once held a monopoly within certain trades, but gradually were getting pushed out by competition and obsolescence.¹³ These were the old urban residents.

Many of the remaining 65 percent were common laborers, working in the newly developed factories of the South in **tobacco manufacture, lumber, coal,** cotton oil refinement and iron and steel production.¹⁴ For example, one-third of the railroad firemen and brakemen and over half the trackmen in the South were black.¹⁵ Two-thirds of the Virginia shipbuilders and the New Orleans dock workers also were black.¹⁶ These were the new urban residents who had been drawn into cities when the South began to industrialize.

Wages in the South were low. For those in non-agricultural work, they ranged from about \$1.25 a day for laborers to \$3.00 a day for artisans.¹⁷ While those in agriculture working for wages earned about \$.75 per day, a majority

¹² Paul Worthman and James Green, "Black Workers in the New South," in Nathan I. Huggins, Martin Kelson and Daniel Fox, eds., *Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience* (New York, 1971), p. 52.

¹³ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South* (Baton Rouge, 1951), pp. 360-61.

¹⁴ Howard Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South 1865-1890* (New York, 1978), p. 66.

¹⁵ Worthman and Green, op. cit., p. 52.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 52-3.

¹⁷ Robert Higgs, *Competition and Coercion* (Cambridge, England, 1977), p. 84.

received no wages at all, working instead for payments in kind.¹⁸ On the average, wages in the South were only about three-fourths of those in the North.¹⁹ Migrants moving North could easily make more as unskilled laborers than they had as artisans in the South. This was constantly pointed out to them and was undoubtedly a large part of the North's appeal.²⁰

It was not only, however, the demand for better conditions and higher wages that brought black laborers into crisis but a tiny insect. The boll weevil, an insect that fed on cotton bolls, entered Texas in 1898 and spread in a state-by-state march destroying all cotton production in its path. This infestation threw hundreds of thousands of agricultural laborers off the land, out of rural areas and into Southern cities.²¹ There developed a great competition for a limited number of jobs. Unemployment among blacks, which was about 13 percent in 1910, reached nearly 20 percent in 1920.²² Writes Emmett Scott:

A host of idle persons thrown suddenly on the labor market could have no other effect than to create an excess in the cities to which they flocked, make laborers easily replaceable, and consequently reduce wages.²³

A Southern newspaper in commenting on this situation declared, "There is nothing for this excess population to do. These people must live on the workers, making the workers poorer."²⁴

The high unemployment in Southern cities was not mitigated by Southern economic development. The South in 1910 was rich in natural resources. It had 40 percent of the nation's forests, 50 percent of the marble, 97 percent of the phosphates and 99 percent of the sulfur.²⁵ But it had no capital.²⁶ A backward region at the close of the Civil War, the South's abundance of raw materials never matched its ability to extract, manufacture and distribute finished products. Impoverished by the war and overdependence on cotton production, a failing exacerbated by the boll weevil infestation, the South for the four decades after the Civil War languished in a pattern of underdevelopment. Table 4 shows a comparative view of development North and South. It is evident from this table that few states in the South approached even half the level of manufacturing in the North.

¹⁸ Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁰ William Tuttle, *Race Riot* (New York, 1970), pp. 81-4.

²¹ Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Woodward, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 317; Samuel Hays, *The Response to Industrialism 1885-1914* (Chicago, 1957), p. 121.

TABLE 4
 PERSONS ENGAGED IN MANUFACTURING AND MECHANICAL
 PURSUITS AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL GAINFULLY
 EMPLOYED, BY SELECTIVE REGION, 1880-1900

North East	1880	1900
R.I.	55.4	52.2
Mass.	50.2	46.2
Conn.	46.8	45.3
N.H.	39.8	42.1
N.J.	38.6	39.4
Penn.	30.8	32.6
Maine	28.4	29.9
Ohio	23.6	27.7
Vt.	20.3	25.2
South	1880	1900
Ala.	4.2	7.8
Ark.	4.2	6.7
Fla.	8.1	14.5
Ga.	5.8	9.6
Ky.	11.2	12.9
La.	8.1	9.7
Miss.	3.0	4.7
N.C.	6.5	12.1
S.C.	4.8	9.9
Tenn.	7.6	9.5
Tex.	5.6	7.4
Va.	11.6	14.1
W. Va.	12.6	14.2

This is not to suggest that the South was undeveloped during this period. Northern financiers had been investing heavily in Southern business since the 1880s and by 1900 had gained at least partial control of lumber, iron and steel, tobacco and cotton, as well as ownership of Southern railroads.²⁷ However, this economic activity was not matched by higher wages or improved standards of living. As Worthman and Green observe, "Living in the primitive huts of upland company towns and segregated in the disease-infested 'slave quarters' of southern cities, black workers had good cause to wonder why they had left the farms."²⁸ Industrialization in general creates profound changes in the lives of workers and did so in the South at this time. "For artisans," writes Hays, "the new emphasis on specialization strips them of their roles of manager and salesman and reduces them to the sole task of selling their labor."²⁹ Many local manufacturers were undercut by the importation of cheaper goods manufactured in the North.³⁰ In 1910, the combination of obsolescence produced by industrialization and surplus labor created by the invasion was too much for the developing South to absorb.

Two things, in particular, affected non-agricultural workers. The first was that fierce competition over a limited number of jobs created a decline in real earnings. Observed one migrant, "Everything has gone up but the poor man's wages."³¹ The other was that those who initially held the better positions were

²⁷ Woodward, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

²⁸ Worthman and Green, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

²⁹ Hays, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

³¹ Emmett Scott, "Additional Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916-1918," *Journal of Negro History*, 4 (October 1919): 426.

the first to be displaced by increased racial competition. With unemployment high and jobs scarce, **white workers** were not willing to write off jobs as "Negro work" as they formerly had done. Commented one migrant:

Houston, Texas: April 29, 1917

Dear Sir: I am a Negro, age 37, and am a core maker by trade having had about 10 years experience at the business, and hold good references from several shops, in which I have been employed. It is hard for a black man to hold a job here, as prejudice is very strong. I have never been discharged on account of dissatisfaction with my work, but I have been 'let out on account of my color.'³²

As noted by Green and Woodson, "Paradoxically enough, the struggle in the South was the reverse of that in the North. In the latter section the whites were securely entrenched in the trades and the negroes were trying to get in. In the South, however, the negroes were strategically situated in the trades at the beginning of this period and the whites were trying to get them out."³³

Competition was also a political phenomenon. Beginning at the turn of the century, laws were established which prohibited blacks from numerous occupations, from holding any skilled positions on the railroads and from a variety of service jobs where, it was argued, they should be replaced by whites who were out of work.³⁴ The result was that many blacks who had formerly worked found their positions threatened. Observes Simpkins, "If a new garment or shoe factory came to a southern town, only whites were employed. 'Give jobs to white men and women,' and 'Blood is thicker than water' were the cries."³⁵ Wrote a migrant from Florida:

Jacksonville, Fla.: April 4, 1917

Dear Sir: We are suffering here all work is given to poor white peoples and we can not get anything to do at all.³⁶

All of these factors served to make black non-agricultural workers, particularly those who had spent some time employed in urban areas, disadvantaged. They faced competition from both black and **white rural workers** willing to **undercut the wage levels** they had enjoyed previously. They faced displacement from trades by white workers who used political disenfranchisement to legislate them out of positions formerly held. And they had no legal recourse or protection.

Recruitment

The South in 1910 was a very isolated region. Economically backward in comparison with the rest of the country, it also had fewer schools, lower levels of literary and less basic services than almost any other region. Rural areas of the South were particularly disadvantaged by lack of educational facilities and by lack of communication with the outside world. The absence of both

³² Ibid., p. 425.

³³ Alonso Green and Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro Wage Earner* (New York, 1930), p. 182.

³⁴ Scott, *Negro Migration During the War*, p. 59.

³⁵ Francis Butler Simpson, *The Old South and the New* (New York, 1947), p. 292.

³⁶ Scott, "Additional Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916-1918," p. 412.

radio and mail delivery meant that many rural residents knew of even major current events only long after the fact.³⁷

Given this isolation, it is important to discover how migrants first found out about opportunities in the North. The initial link that Southern black workers had with Northern employers was made by labor agents. Labor agents were employees of Northern companies who traveled extensively in Southern cities bringing word of employment.³⁸ They were paid for each migrant they were able to bring North, at the rate of \$2-3 each.³⁹ Labor agents were surprisingly selective of migrants considering they were paid on the basis described. They favored men over women, young over old, healthy over infirm and experienced over inexperienced.⁴⁰ In some cases migrants had to sign statements certifying their age and health. Misrepresentation was grounds for instant dismissal.

Migrants were also made aware of opportunities in the North through advertisement in the "World's greatest weekly," the *Chicago Defender*. The *Chicago Defender* was a black newspaper begun in that city in 1908 by Robert Abbot. Abbot was a crusading publisher who printed very persuasive articles on the problems faced by blacks in the United States. Once labor agents had infiltrated the South, the *Defender* took up the call and broadcast the message, particularly throughout urban areas of the South. The paper's influence was extensive.⁴¹ During the period of the Great Migration the *Defender* was said to have sold between 150,000 and 300,000 copies per issue. Roi Ottley, who has studied Abbott and the *Defender* points out that if each copy reached five readers, a reasonable guess, about 1,500,000 blacks saw it.⁴²

The *Defender* did more than editorialize about the benefits of the migration. It published want ads such as the following, directing migrants to specific employers in the North.

Wanted — Men for laborers and semi-skilled occupations. Address or apply to the Employment Department. Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Co., East Pittsburgh, Pa.⁴³

Often migrants wrote directly to these companies, mentioning that they had read about the job opportunity in the newspaper.

Pensacola, Fla., April 29, 1917

Dear Sir: I was looking over the Chicago Defender and I saw where you wanting mens to work . . . I am a painter by traid but I will and can do eny kind of worke I am a sober and hard working man I see where you can use sum moulders I am not a moulder but I am a moulder son I can do that worke till the moulder come.⁴⁴

Both labor agents and the black press were responsible for the initial communication of the news of the migration. They helped to create "the moving fever."⁴⁵ Their campaigns were waged in Southern cities where there was not

³⁷ Ray Stannard Baker, *Following the Color Line* (New York, 1908), p. 101.

³⁸ See, for example, Scott, *Negro Migration During the War*, Henri, *Black Migration: Movement North 1900-1920* (New York, 1975), p. 60-62, and Tuttle, op. cit.

³⁹ Henri, op. cit., p. 61.

⁴⁰ Donald Henderson, "The Negro Migration of 1916-1918," *Journal of Negro History* 5 (October 1921): 448.

⁴¹ Kennedy, op. cit., p. 53.

⁴² Roi Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior: The Life and Times of Robert S. Abbott* (Chicago, 1955), pp. 138-39.

⁴³ Scott, *Negro Migration During the War*, pp. 17-18.

⁴⁴ Scott, "Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916-1918," pp. 300-01.

⁴⁵ Carole Marks, "Lines of Communication: Recruitment Mechanisms and the Great Migration of 1916-1918," *Social Problems*, 31 (October 1983): 76-77.

only the largest concentration of workers but the important transportation terminals to the North.⁴⁶ There a relatively experienced work group could be mobilized in a very short period of time.

Having learned of opportunities in the North, migrants had then to arrange financing. Travel costs between South and North were very high. Florette Henri indicates, for example, that the regular passenger fare was \$.02 per mile in 1915, and \$.024 in 1918. To Chicago from Savannah was 1,027 railroad miles: to Detroit from New Orleans, 1,096 miles, to Cleveland from Mobile, 1,046 miles. In 1918, it would have cost \$22.52 per person from New Orleans to Chicago, or over \$135 for a family of six. A relatively short trip, Norfolk to Pittsburgh, would have cost a family of six \$73.⁴⁷ Thus, it was not easy to get to "The Promised Land." For a rural laborer earning \$.75 a day, it would have taken five weeks of total earnings to make even a very short trip.

Many researchers assume that the trip was paid for by labor agents.⁴⁸ Agents did indeed provide train "passes" for workers at the beginning of the migration.⁴⁹ The practice was soon abandoned in favor of one where transportation costs were advanced and later deducted from wages.⁵⁰ Neither system, however, proved to be effective. Many contemporary observers note that the volume directly attributable to labor agents, particularly after 1916, is small. This is due, in part, to the fact that Southern authorities began charging them exorbitant fees, making their recruitment expensive.⁵¹ At the same time, Northern employers began to complain about the work force gathered by agents. Writes Kennedy:

The earliest movements contained a large number who had not been economically successful in the South and were even greater failures in the North. They simply floated from one job and one place to the next, inevitably swelling the turnover rate for colored laborers as well as arousing the wrath and disgust of employers.⁵²

Employers wanted to exercise more control. They demanded greater selectivity of labor agents and lent money to migrants to move their families only after they had been on the job, "believing that you will get a better type of man when he is willing to pay his own way."⁵³

Indeed, many migrants going North did pay for the trip themselves. They sold everything that was not nailed down.⁵⁴ Families would pool resources and send one member North hoping that high salaries would allow in time the rest to be brought up.⁵⁵ Epstein's study of 500 migrants in Pittsburgh, for example, suggests that 80 percent paid for the trip through savings and the sale of property and household goods.⁵⁶ The Chicago Race Commission in its 1919

⁴⁶ Florant, *op. cit.*, p. 786.

⁴⁷ Henri, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

⁴⁸ See Spear, *op. cit.*, p. 133 for discussion.

⁴⁹ Tuttle, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

⁵⁰ Henri, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62; Tuttle, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

⁵² Kennedy, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

⁵³ Department of Agriculture, "Report on the Study of Negro Migration" (Washington, D.C., 1923), p. 10.

⁵⁴ Henri, *op. cit.*, pp. 59, 66.

⁵⁵ Spear, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

⁵⁶ Abraham Epstein, *The Negro Migrant in Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh, 1918), p. 35.

report estimated that 70 percent of its sample did the same.⁵⁷ In these circumstances, as Florant indicated, those who had spent some time in Southern cities would be more likely to have the fare.

Direct information on the previous work experience of migrants supports this thesis. Epstein's study suggests that the agricultural sector was only 26 percent, with five percent of these individuals owning their own farms.⁵⁸ Seventy-four percent of the migrants in his study were non-agricultural laborers (see Table 5). The Chicago Race Commission report suggests that only about one in four were engaged in agricultural employment.⁵⁹ A Department of Labor survey found that about half came from Southern towns, with experience in lumbering, railroading and iron and steel foundries.⁶⁰ A large amount of non-agricultural experience was also reported in the letters in the Scott collection.⁶¹ The selectivity of labor agents, the places of their recruitment, the media link to the publication of information and the reporting of financing all suggest that urban, non-agricultural workers were more likely to hear about and be able to capitalize on migration inducements. Taken together, it must be concluded that as early as 1920 a majority of migrants were not drawn directly from farms.

TABLE 5
OCCUPATIONS OF MIGRANTS IN PITTSBURGH AS COMPARED WITH
STATEMENTS OF OCCUPATIONS IN SOUTH

Occupations	In Pittsburgh	Percent	In South	Percent
Common Laborer	468	95	286	54
Skilled or semi-skilled	20	4	59	11
Saw Mill workers & Miners	0	0	45	9
Farmers	0	0	136	26
(ran own farm)	0	0	33	(5)
Other occupations	5	1	0	0
Total	493	100	529*	100

Adapted from Epstein, fn. 56.
* Differences in total may be due to those with overlapping occupations.

To suggest that most migrants spent some time in Southern cities does not specify, however, the duration of that residence. Rural laborers may have worked in Southern cities only long enough to finance the trip North. This doubt may be answered by examining literacy. Because of the greater availability of schools in urban areas and the near absence of them in rural ones,⁶² literacy indicates residence for some time in an urban area.

Lieberson's work on literacy and the selectivity of the migration of blacks bears on this point.⁶³ Lieberson wanted to discover whether the large-scale movement out of the South of the black population in 1910-1920 had a negative impact on the literacy rates of blacks in the North. That is, would literacy rates in the North have been higher if there had been no out-

⁵⁷ Chicago Race Commission, *The Negro in Chicago*, (Chicago, 1920), p. 93.
⁵⁸ Epstein, op. cit., p. 35.
⁵⁹ Chicago Race Commission, op. cit., p. 95.
⁶⁰ Quoted in Henri, op. cit., p. 69.
⁶¹ Scott, "Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916-1918," and "Additional Letters of Negro Migrants."
⁶² Higgs, op. cit., p. 120; Woodward, op. cit., p. 400.
⁶³ Stanley Lieberson, "Selective Black Migration from the South: A Historical View" in Frank D. Bean and W. Parker Frisbie, *The Demography of Racial and Ethnic Groups* (New York, 1978), pp. 119-41.

migration of blacks from the South?⁶⁴ He found for the period of the Great Migration, opposite to what had been found in the past, that the rate of literacy actually was slightly higher than would have been predicted had there been no out-migration. This suggests that there was, during the Great Migration, a significant out-migration of literate blacks (see Table 6). It should be emphasized that the selectivity is particularly evident within the younger age cohorts and is stronger for men than women.⁶⁵ These characteristics are consistent with the recruitment criteria of Northern employers and labor agents and of standards suggested by the advertisements in the black press.

TABLE 6
NET MIGRATION RATES FROM THE SOUTH, BLACKS GROUPED BY
AGE, SEX, AND LITERACY, 1890-1920

Decade and initial age	Net migration rate			
	Male		Female	
	Illiterate	Literate	Illiterate	Literate
1890-1900				
15-24	-.01770	-.06530	-.01139	-.07191
25-34	-.01079	-.02228	-.00781	-.02023
35-44	.00941	.03483	-.00504	.02866
45-54	.00317	.01012	-.00566	.05037
55+	.00225	.02669	.00061	.16043
1900-1910				
15-24	-.01355	-.06520	-.01019	-.05679
25-34	-.00465	-.01169	-.00655	-.00591
35-44	.01082	.04272	-.00295	.01838
45-54	.00619	.01179	-.00336	.03499
55+	-.00219	.02426	-.00531	.08007
1910-1920				
15-24	-.03410	-.16668	-.02225	-.12395
25-34	-.02702	-.10043	-.01655	-.06579
35-44	-.01023	-.01738	-.01415	-.05237
45-54	-.00651	-.02741	-.01512	-.06039
55+	-.00657	-.02423	-.00796	-.06072

SOURCE: Lieberman, fn. 63.

The importance of the literacy finding lies not in a general assessment that urban workers are literate. Indeed, literacy is not a criteria for non-agricultural employment in the South at this time. Rather, the point is that high rates of literacy among this migrating population suggest that a majority were neither rural laborers nor newcomers to Southern cities. Concludes Lieberman:

The great pull on southern blacks exerted by the conditions in World War I and its aftermath, as well as the South's unwitting push owing to the dismal outlook for blacks, was particularly powerful among the better educated young adults of the South.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Lieberman, op. cit., p. 124.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 126.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 130-31.

From the foregoing, it is evident that a much more selective segment of the black population left the South than previously has been assumed. It was not, as Kennedy claimed, "the Negro peasant who turned cityward."⁶⁷

Conditions of Labor in the North

The finding of a very different migrant population than is usually assumed challenges basic assumptions about the experiences of blacks in the North. The conventional wisdom is that the failure of blacks to move upward was a product of the mass migration from the rural South to Northern cities. Yet it has been shown that most migrants were not rural. How were migrants, many of whom were urban and literate, absorbed into the Northern economy? To address this question, conditions of labor in the North must be examined. Before the Great Migration, blacks in the North, small in number, were used most typically in domestic and personal service. Employment in manufacturing was in the hands of European migrants. The use of this group as opposed to the Southern reserves was due historically to the key role played by blacks in the South's pre-industrial economy and the North's direct ties to that economy, and to the great fear in the North associated with an unchecked exodus of blacks from the South.⁶⁸ The war in Europe which cut off the supply of immigrant labor, the boll weevil invasion which destroyed the cotton dependence, and most importantly, industrialization itself set in motion the migratory pressures that have been described.

Labor was needed in the North and Southern blacks were the largest (and cheapest) available substitute. The North represented a change in black labor market utilization, a change not advantageous for black workers.⁶⁹ Jobs available there were neither profitable nor mobility-producing. Observed one migrant working for Graham Paige in Detroit:

Many workers would pass out. The boys would say, "The bear has got you." When we got real hot, we'd see little dots in front of us. We worked on a swing shift. We'd get through after a continual half running pace all day, fifteen minutes before the whistle. If we sat down we often caught the cramps in our legs and all over. We couldn't move, sometimes we had to wait fifteen or thirty minutes before we could get up and go home.⁷⁰

Often migrants were recruited for work Northern workers would not take, at wages well below existing scales. Regional wage differences meant that migrants would accept low wages by Northern standards because they were so much higher than the wages they would have gotten in the South. These inequities were formalized by some labor agents who would bind migrants to low wage contracts for a specified period before they even left the South. Migrants had to work through the contracts before they could improve their wages.

While all immigrant groups had faced some of these patterns of discrimination, blacks were the first group to face them in the context of an economy

⁶⁷ Kennedy, op. cit.

⁶⁸ Stephen Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth* (Boston, 1981), p. 187.

⁶⁹ See Chicago Race Commission, op. cit., p. 325; Henri, op. cit., pp. 93-131.

⁷⁰ Charles Denby, *Indignant Heart* (London, 1979), p. 34.

which would prosper by dividing workers.⁷¹ Segmentation, as this process is called, is profitable when bottom level, dead-end jobs may be filled by a steady supply of exploitable, cheap labor. No one willingly takes on such jobs.⁷² Blacks were forced to by virtue of the unique combination of their ethnic exclusion and economic vulnerability, a combination that employers had unsuccessfully attempted to impose on workers in the past. It became apparent that the fostered antagonism of Irish against Pole that had fallen on deaf ears found its measure in appeals of white against black.

The result was that a substantial gap developed between black workers and the rest of the society.⁷³

In his report of the situation in Minneapolis, Abram Harris points out that in 1919 the Bureau of Labor Statistics considered a weekly wage of \$43.51 essential to maintain an acceptable standard of living for a family of five. In contrast to this, Harris found that of the 222 married negro men with families whom he interviewed in Minneapolis, only 12 were receiving more than \$40.00 a week, 200 were earning between \$15.00 and \$30.00 a week, and the median weekly wage was \$22.55.⁷⁴

The exploitation of labor precluded advantages that otherwise may have accrued to migrants. Skilled artisans and common laborers alike were recruited for the lowest level jobs at the lowest pay. Reported one organization from New York City, of the 2,000 skilled workers surveyed only "one was employed at his calling."⁷⁵ The rest were "rendering menial service as porters, elevator operators, chauffeurs, waiters, common laborers and so on."⁷⁶ Some of these workers were graduates of Hampton, Tuskegee and other industrial schools of the South who had been attracted North by promises of better wages and better conditions. It is clear that their actual wages as unskilled laborers were not commensurate with their skills; and advancement was almost impossible.

But these outcomes represent structural limits to mobility, not personal ones. Migrants failed to advance because they were recruited for low skill positions and occupied jobs that native workers shunned. They did not bear the burden of "a race changing from farm life to city life."⁷⁷ They bore the burdens of peripheral migrants incorporated into an advanced economic system. This is a familiar pattern in modern international labor migrations where selected migrants are recruited for the lowest level jobs, often those shunned by native labor, and experience neither upward mobility nor great benefit from their incorporation into a core society.⁷⁸ For urban, non-agricultural workers of the Great Migration the journey North was not to a land of opportunity but yet another form of servitude.

⁷¹ David Gordon, Richard Edwards and Michael Reid, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers: Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States* (New York, 1982), p. 153.

⁷² Michael Piore, *Birds of Passage* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), p. 140.

⁷³ Stanley Lieberson, *A Piece of the Pie* (Berkeley, 1980), p. 335.

⁷⁴ Kennedy, op. cit., p. 99.

⁷⁵ Henderson, op. cit., p. 449.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Gelbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (New York, 1963), p. 128.

⁷⁸ Piore, op. cit., p. 24.

Conclusions

While there have been numerous interpretations of the Great Migration, none has attempted to answer the important question of "Who left?" Most have either ignored it completely or assumed the group to be so varied as to make assessments futile. The Great Migration was a very selective exodus. This study shows that a majority of migrants were not farm laborers but non-agricultural workers. It does so (1) by showing the actual size of the non-agricultural population, which size suggests a greater potential for migration among this group than is usually assumed, (2) by the expense of the trip, which would have eliminated a majority of the rural, non-wage-earning laborers, and (3) by contemporary reports, which suggest that most migrants, contrary to speculation, paid for the trip themselves. It also points out that migration information was passed on by labor agents selective of those with non-agricultural experience; by agents who, in addition, recruited in cities, areas of high concentration of non-agricultural workers, and by the black press, particularly the *Chicago Defender*, whose circulation was high in urban centers. The effectiveness of these inducements to non-agricultural workers is supported by accounts of the previous work histories of migrants and high rates of out-migration from the South among literates during the decade. Information about leaving was disseminated among an experienced and literate population and they were duly affected by it.

Previous research has also neglected the important developmental aspects of migration. Development itself was creating difficulties for black workers, particularly those with skills. Industrialization in the South did not create greater opportunities for them. Competition, exacerbated by the boll weevil but not exclusive to it, made the black non-agricultural workers still worse off. For this displaced sector of the population, appeals from the North came at an opportune time. Northern employers were drawn South in search, particularly after the War in Europe in 1914, of alternative supplies of cheap labor. Employers selected among the displaced, young, able-bodied and experienced men, a group desperate enough to take on the low skill, high risk employment in the North.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the specific impact that this migrant population had on the Northern economy, it may be persuasively argued that lack of skills, lack of literacy and non-urban residence, previously assumed explanations of their lack of mobility, were characteristics that did not apply to a majority of those who journeyed North. That they did not succeed, and indeed it is clear that many did not, must be tied to much more structural factors than a Southern rural heritage.