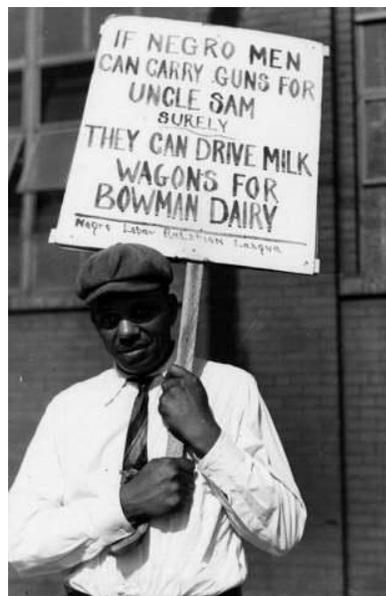


# The Great Migration

## 1915–1970

During World War I, many blacks from the South were moving to the North to begin work with the Pennsylvania Railroad Company. Within two years, 400,000 African Americans had migrated north. Many blacks were escaping the racial persecution that plagued the South. In the early twentieth century, the overwhelming majority of African Americans lived in the South. Many industrial jobs in the North, however, were becoming available. By the 1920s, ten percent of the United States' black population had migrated to the North.

The causes of the “Great Migration” varied. The most obvious reason was racism; but if that had been the only reason, African Americans would have moved as soon as they gained their freedom. “Jim Crow” laws were instituted in the South. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the cotton industry was in decline, and there were not many employment opportunities for Southern blacks. By 1917, however, the United States was preparing to enter World War I. With millions of American men joining the war, the United States faced a labor shortage. As a result, many Southern African-American men headed north looking for work. The United States did not officially enter the war until 1917, but it had been supplying European allies since the start of the war. With the decline of immigration, jobs in war-supply factories were opening.



In the South, word spread of job opportunities awaiting blacks in the North. Some men went to “test the waters.” As soon as Southern African Americans received word of the new opportunities, the Great Migration commenced. Northerners did anything imaginable to lure young black workers. Labor spies from the North, stood on Southern street corners handing out train passes to Northern cities. There were job advertisements in black newspapers. There were stories of African Americans flourishing in the North.

Trains, buses, cars, and even horse-drawn carriages transported African Americans to what they hoped would be a better life in the North. However, the trips were not pleasant. Blacks had to endure segregated waiting rooms, buses, and

train cars. There was little, or nothing, to drink or eat. The fares were high. Because of the Great Migration, fares drastically increased. In 1915, a train ride cost two cents per mile, but by 1918 it cost twenty-four cents per mile. Many migrants made the trip in stages. They would stop somewhere and work to earn the fare for the remainder of the trip. This type of travel took a long time.

Railroad companies were first to hire Southern migrants. Other industries essential to the growing war economy, such as the steel mills, made unprecedented promises to prospective African-American employees. The workers often hired were generally poor and willing to take advantage of any opportunity. As the jobs in the North were beginning to fill, labor spies were no longer offering train passes. At the same time, Southern authorities were not allowing these spies into their black communities. Additionally, train depots were not honoring the labor passes; and some men were even forced off trains to prevent their leaving. Some Southern employers feared losing their labor force to the Northern cities.



The Great Migration prompted a large population increase in Northern African-American communities. By the 1920s, New York's black population rose by sixty-six percent. Chicago's rose by one hundred forty-eight percent, and Philadelphia's black population increased by five hundred percent. Detroit's black population grew by six hundred eleven percent. During this time, Henry Ford revolutionized the assembly line in his car factories. By 1929, half of the 25,000 employees at

the Ford Motor Company were African American. Many worked long hours and several jobs. Wages were significantly higher in the North. In Alabama, an unskilled foundry worker could earn up to \$2.50 for a ten-hour workday, whereas in Illinois, one could earn \$4.25 for the same job. Southern black migrants were desirable because they were willing to work for less. This angered many Northern whites, who feared their jobs might be in jeopardy because of the cheaper incoming labor.

Even though many blacks were moving north to escape the racism in the South, racism was prevalent in the North. Growing tension between whites and blacks in the North reached a high in 1919, the "Red Summer." In East St. Louis,

Illinois, a riot ensued due to an aluminum plant hiring blacks to break a labor strike. A meeting was held to prevent blacks from migrating into East St. Louis. After the meeting, a rumor circulated about a black man who shot a white man. The rumor escalated to an intentional shooting that involved white women. A mob of whites congregated and began randomly attacking any black person they could find. They went into black neighborhoods and fired shots into homes. Forty-eight African Americans were left dead.

Nonetheless, blacks in the North persevered. Blacks were voting in the North without fear of persecution from Southern racist groups. African Americans were elected to political office and gained political power.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Discussion Questions:

1. Why did African Americans migrate to Northern cities?
2. Describe the African-Americans' journey to the North.
3. How did Southerners attempt to prevent African Americans from moving north?
4. Why did white Northerners fear the influx of African-American laborers could jeopardize their jobs?
5. What sparked the East St. Louis race riots?