

Black Migrants Letters Home

Introduction

During the twentieth century, millions of African Americans left the South for cities in the Midwest, East Coast, and West Coast, collectively referred to as the Great Migration. The first wave of migration occurred roughly between 1900 and 1925. Migration peaked during World War I (1914-18) as war production required a massive increase in industrial workers. The second wave of the Great Migration occurred during the 1940s and 50s, spurred by the economic expansion caused by World War II.

Many African Americans moved from rural areas to southern cities like Atlanta, Houston, and Memphis. Many more left the South for industrial work in northern cities. Like most migrants, black southerners tended to follow friends and family who already relocated to northern cities. Patterns of migration emerged quickly: migrants from the Upper South - Virginia, the Carolinas - tended to move East to cities such as New York City, New Jersey, Philadelphia; migrants from the Deep South – Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana – moved straight up North to Cleveland, Detroit, and especially, Chicago; African Americans from the Border South – Tennessee, Texas, Missouri – start moving Westward to Los Angeles, Oakland, and Seattle.

The first wave of migration consisted primarily of black southerners from the Deep South, particularly Mississippi to Chicago. African Americans hoped to escape segregation and the violence that came with it, find better work than sharecropping, and provide better education for their children. While northern cities did provide more employment opportunity and a reprieve from the oppressive system of segregation found in the South, black southern quickly learned that “the North” was far from integrated. African Americans were concentrated in particular neighborhoods like the Southside of Chicago, known as Bronzeville by the 1920s. Same with Harlem in New York City and the Hough neighborhood in Cleveland. Black migrants encountered segregation, employment discrimination, and threats of violence in northern cities, albeit somewhat less intense than in the South. Black migrants also faced resentment from African Americans born the North who thought black southerners were ignorant and unprepared for life in the North.

African American newspapers and other publications, like the NAACP’s *The Crisis* magazine, reported on the many aspects of the Great Migration as it was happening. *The Journal of Negro History*¹, the first academic journal dedicated to African American history and culture, started publishing in 1916, partially inspired by the rapid changes brought on by the Great Migration. The Journal was founded by Carter G. Woodson, the second African American man to earn a PhD in History at Harvard

¹ Now known as *The Journal of African American History*, published by the University of Chicago Press.

University (you will remember that W.E.B. Du Bois was the first)². Woodson later served as Chair of the African American Studies department at Howard University. In 1925, Woodson organized the first “Negro History Week” to encourage public schools to include African American history in their curriculum³. Woodson started collecting letters and oral histories from the migrants the same year the Journal began publishing. In 1919, Woodson edited a special issue of the Journal focused entirely on the Great Migration, including a large selection of the letters he had collected over the last four years. The letters below are part of Woodson’s collection. Journal editors did not include names of the individual people mentioned in the letters, primarily to protect African Americans still living in the South from white southerners looking for retribution. The letters retain the spelling and grammar used in the original letters.⁴

Primary Source

PHILADELPHIA, PA., Oct. 7, 1917

Dear Sir: I take this method of thanking you for yours early responding and the glorious effect of the treatment. Oh. I do feel so fine. Dr. the treatment reach me almost ready to move I am now housekeeping again I like it so much better than rooming. Well Dr. with the aid of God I am making very good I make \$75 per month. I am carrying enough insurance to pay me \$20 per week if I am not able to be on duty. I don’t have to work hard. dont have to mister every little white boy comes along I havent heard a white man call a colored a nigger you no now—since I been in the state of Pa. I can ride in the electric street and steam cars any where I get a seat. I dont care to mix with white what I mean I am not crazy about being with white folks, but if I have to pay the same fare I have learn to want the same acomidation. and if you are first in a place here shoping you dont have to wait until the white folks get thro tradeing yet amid all this I shall ever love the good old South and I am praying that God may give every well wisher a chance to be a man regardless of his color, and if my going to the front would bring about such conditions I am ready any day—well Dr. I dont want to worry you but read between lines; and maybe you can see a little sense in my weak statement the kids are in school every day I have only two and I guess that all. Dr. when you find time I would be delighted to have a word from the good old home state. Wife join me in sending love you and yours. I am your friend and patient.

CHICAGO, ILL.

Dear Partner: You received a few days ago and I was indeed glad to hear from you and know that you was well. How is the old burg and all of the boys. Say partner is it true that T——— M——— was shot by a Negro Mon. It is all over the city among the people of H’burg⁵ if so let know at once so I tell the boys it true. Well so much for that. I wish you could have been

² Interesting that both Du Bois and Woodson earned their PhDs in History. Why do you think that is?

³ Negro History Week was the predecessor of Black History Month in February.

⁴ Emmett J. Scott, *Letters of Negro Migrants, 1916-1919*, in the *Journal of Negro History*, Vol 4, No 3, July 1919, believed to be in the public domain. (The entire journal is digitized if you are interested in seeing the other articles that are part of the Great Migration issue, including Woodson’s editorial about the project). This issue was published only weeks before the Chicago Race Riot in July, 1919, one of the worst riots of Red Summer.

⁵ Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

here to have been here to those games. I saw them and beleve me they was worth the money I pay to see them. T.S. and I went out to see Sunday game witch was 7 to 2 White Sox and I saw Satday game 2 to 1 White Sox⁶. Please tell J———— write that he will never see nothing as long as he stay down there behind the sun there some thing to see up here all the time. (tell old E———— B———— to go to (H————) Tell B———— he dont hafter answer my cards. How is friend Wilson Wrote him a letter in August. Tell him that all right I will see him in the funny paper⁷. Well Partner I guess you hear a meny funey thing about Chicago. Half you hear is not true. I know B———— C———— hav tole a meny lie. Whenever you here see them Pardie tell them to write to this a dress. Say Pardie old H———— is moping up in his Barber shop. Guess I will come to you Boy Xmas. I must go to bed. Just in from a hard days work. Your life long friend.

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, 11/13/17

Mr. H————

Hattiesburg, Miss.

Dear M————: Yours received sometime ago and found all well and doing well. hope you and family are well.

I got my things alright the other day and they were in good condition. I am all fixed now and living well. I certainly appreciate what you done for us and I will remember you in the near future.

M————, 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 the place I take everything in charge and was raised to \$95. a month. You know I know my stuff.

Whats the news generally around H'burg? I should have been here 20 years ago. I just begin to feel like a man. It's a great deal of pleasure in knowing that you have got some privilege. My children are going to the same school with the whites and I dont have to umble to no one. I have registered—Will vote the next election and there isnt any 'yes sir' and 'no sir'—its all yes and no and Sam and Bill.

Florine says hello and would like very much to see you.

⁶ The White Sox started as a minor league team in Sioux City, Iowa. Former baseball player and head coach of the Cincinnati Reds, Charles Comiskey, bought the team during the 1890s, moved the team to Chicago, and built a new stadium for the White Sox on the Southside of city called Comiskey Park. The already established Chicago Cubs baseball team played at Wrigley Field in the northern part of Chicago. Wealthier (and whiter) neighborhoods in Chicago tended to support the Cubs. The White Sox, however, were the team of immigrants, African Americans, and working-class people living on the Southside. Interestingly, the same year these letters were published, 1919, the White Sox played Cincinnati in the World Series. The heavily favored White Sox lost by one game. Soon after, several White Sox players were charged with fixing the 1919 World Series, i.e., deliberately throwing the game to Cincinnati in exchange for money. The press called it the "Black Sox Scandal." The whole thing was orchestrated by gambling kingpin and racketeer, Arthur Rothstein, who later joined Italian Mafia bosses, Lucky Luciano and Frank Costello, and Jewish Mob boss, Meyer Lansky, in turning the sleepy desert town of Las Vegas into a gambling paradise. Eight White Sox players were indicted in the scandal and banned permanently from professional baseball. Most notably, "Shoeless" Joe Jackson, still considered one of the greatest players of all time. As a result, Shoeless Joe will never be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame, although his family has tried to have his name cleared for decades. The 1919 World Series was exactly 100 years ago. My guess for the 2019 World Series is the Yankees (of course) and the Washington Nationals. They have a very good team this year. Of course, my team, the Boston Red Sox, did horribly this year and didn't even make it to the playoffs.

⁷ The "funny papers/pages" refers to the comic strips and cartoons published in newspapers. Traditionally, the daily papers carried a few comic strips, while the Sunday editions had a whole section dedicated to comics and cartoons. "See you in the funny papers" was a lighthearted way of saying "see you later."

All joins me in sending love to you and family. How is times there now? Answer soon, from your friend and bro.

EAST CHICAGO, IND., June 10, 1917

Dr. _____,

Union Springs, Ala.

Dear Old Friend: These moments I thought I would write you a few true facts of the present condition of the north. Certainly I am trying to take a close observation—now it is tru the (col)⁸ men are making good. Never pay less than \$3.00 per day or (10) hours—this is not promise. I do not see how they pay such wages the way they work labors⁹. they do not hurry or drive you. Remember this is the very lowest wages. Piece work men can make from \$6 to \$8 per day. They receive their pay every two weeks. this city I am living in, the population 30,000 (20) miles from Big Chicago, Ill¹⁰. Doctor I am some what impress. My family also. They are doing nicely. I have no right to complain what ever. I rec. the papers you mail me some few days ago and you no I enjoyed them reading about the news down in Dixie. I often think of so much of the conversation we engage in concerning this part of the worl. I wish many time that you could see our People up there as they are entirely in a different light. I witness Decoration Day on May 30th, the line of march was 4 miles. (8) brass band¹¹. All business houses were close. I tell you the people here are patriotic. I enclose you the cut of the white press. the chief of police drop dead Friday. Burried him today. The procession about (3) miles long. Over (400) auto in the parade—five dpt—police Force, Mayor and alderman and secret societies; we are having some cold weather—we are still wearing over coats—Let me know what is my little city doing. People are coming here every day and are finding employment. Nothing here but money and it is not hard to get. Remember me to your dear Family. Oh, I have children in school every day with the white children. I will write you more next time. how is the lodge.

Yours friend,

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⁸ Colored.

⁹ Interesting comment. Why would he point this out?

¹⁰ Bronzeville is about 5 miles from downtown Chicago and 12 miles from Wrigley Field on the Northside. Public transportation did not run from the Southside to Downtown until after WWII, so it probably seemed like 20 miles.

¹¹ Decoration Day was the predecessor to Memorial Day. Before WWII, celebrations recognizing veterans were organized by local communities, and later, by state governments. As a result, Decoration Day occurred on different days in different places— although almost all were during the last few weeks of May – and celebrated differently from community to community. Chicago had one of the biggest Decoration Day celebrations complete with parades, picnics, speeches from city leaders and veterans, and general joviality. Congress designated the last Monday in May a federal holiday called Memorial Day in 1967, during the height of Vietnam War.