

"Sir I Will Thank You with All My Heart": Letters from the Great Migration

Introduction

Hopefully you already read the previous collection of letters written home by African American migrants. This collection of letters comes from the same *Journal of Negro History* article published in 1919. These letters were not sent back to friends and family in the South, however. Many black southerners learned about opportunities in northern cities from the Black Press, most notably the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Many black southerners wrote directly to the newspapers asking for help getting to the North. The *Defender* actively encouraged African Americans to come to Chicago, and responded directly to as many letters as they could. Below are some of the letters sent to the *Chicago Defender* offices¹. Like the previous set of letters, these are reprinted in their original form.

Primary Source

Lutcher, La., May 13, 1917

Dear Sir: I have been reading the *Chicago defender* and seeing so many advertisements about the work in the north I thought to write you concerning my condition. I am working hard in the south and can hardly earn a living. I have a wife and one child and can hardly feed them. I thought to write and ask you for some information concerning how to get a pass for myself and family. I dont want to leave my family behind as I cant hardly make a living for them right here with them and I know they would fare hard if I would leave them. If there are any agents in the south there havent been any of them to Lutcher if they would come here they would get at least fifty men. Please sir let me hear from you as quick as possible. Now this is all. Please dont publish my letter, I was out in town today talking to some of the men and they say if they could get passes that 30 or 40 of them would come. But they havent got the money and they dont know how to come. But they are good strong and able working men. If you will instruct me I will instruct the other men how to come as they all want to work. Please dont publish this because we have to whisper this around among our selves because the white folks are angry now because the negroes are going north.

¹ Emmett J. Scott, *Letters of Negro Migrants, 1916-1919*, in the *Journal of Negro History, Vol 4, No 3, July 1919* is 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)

Natchez, Miss., Sept. 22–17

MR. R. S. ABBOTT, Editor².

Dear Sir: I thought that you might help me in Some way either personally or through your influence, is why I am worrying you for which I beg pardon.

I am a married man having wife and mother to support, (I mention this in order to properly convey my plight) conditions here are not altogether good and living expenses growing while wages are small. My greatest desire is to leave for a better place but am unable to raise the money.

I can write short stories all of which portray negro characters but no burlesque³ can also write poems, have a gift for cartooning but have never learned the technicalities of comic drawing. these things will never profit me anything here in Natchez. Would like to know if you could use one or two of my short stories in serial form in your great paper they are very interesting and would furnish good reading matter. By this means I could probably leave here in short and thus come in possession of better employment enabling me to take up my drawing which I like best.

Kindly let me hear from you and if you cannot favor me could you refer me to any Negro publication buying fiction from their race.

Selma, Ala., May 19, 1917

Dear Sir: I am a reader of the Chicago Defender I think it is one of the Most Wonderful Papers of our race printed. Sirs I am writeing to see if You all will please get me a job. And Sir I can wash dishes, wash iron nursing work in groceries and dry good stores. Just any of these I can do. Sir, who so ever you get the job from please tell them to send me a ticket and I will pay them. When I get their as I have not got enough money to pay my way. I am a girl of 17 years old and in the 8 grade at Knox Academy School. But on account of not having money enough I had to stop school. Sir I will thank you all with all my heart. May God Bless you all. Please answer in return mail.

Port Arthur, Texas, 5/5th/17

Dear Sir: Permitt me to inform you that I have had the pleasure of reading the Defender for the first time in my life as I never dreamed that there was such a race paper published and I must say that its some paper.

However I can unhesitatingly say that it is extraordinarily interesting and had I know that there was such a paper in my town or such being handled in my vicinity I would have been a subscriber years ago.

² Robert Abbott migrated from Georgia to Chicago around 1900, and started publishing the *Chicago Defender* in 1905. *The Defender* was by far the most widely read and influential black newspaper in the United States throughout the twentieth century. The newspaper “sponsored” hundreds of black southerners who wanted to move to Chicago. The Defender office on State Street were the first stop for many migrants in need of a place to stay, food, employment, and general assistance.

³ Burlesque refers to an exaggerated or campy interpretation of something.

Nevertheless I read every space of the paper dated April 28th which is my first and only paper at present. Although I am greatly anticipating the pleasure of receiving my next Defender as I now consider myself a full fledged defender fan and I have also requested the representative of said paper to deliver my Defender weekly.

In reading the Defenders want ad I notice that there is lots of work to be had and if I havent miscomprehended I think I also understand that the transportation is advanced to able bodied working men who is out of work and desire work. Am I not right? with the understanding that those who have been advanced transportation same will be deducted from their salary after they have begun work. Now then if this is they proposition I have about 10 or 15 good working men who is out of work and are dying to leave the south and I assure you that they are working men and will be too glad to come north east or west, any where but the south.

Now then if this is the proposition kindly let me know by return mail. However I assure you that it shall be my pleasure to furnish you with further or all information that you may undertake to ask or all information necessary concerning this communication.

Thanking you in advance for the courtesy of a prompt reply with much interest.

Bessemer, Ala., 5/14/17

Sirs: Noticing and ad in Chicago Defender of your assitance to those desiring employment there I thought I mayhaps you could help me secure work in your Windy City. I'm a married man have one child. I have common school education, this is my hand write. I am presently employed as a miner has been for 14 years but would like a Change. I'm apt to learn would like to get where I could go on up and support myself and family. You know more about it than I but in your opinion could I make anything as pullman porter being inexperienced? I'd be so grateful to U. to place me in something I've worked myself too hard for nothing. I'm sober and can adjust my life with any kind and am a quiet christian man.

New Orleans, April 22, 1917

Dear Sir: under the head lines in the Chicago Defender of Saturday April 22-17 I red how some of us that goes up north are being treated. there is a few that have gone from this city north, and came back a few weeks. some say they came back on account of being to cold "The ohters Say they ware to pay so much to get work etc" I would like to go north. and would rather be in some place. other then Chicago or near Chicago. I am a union man" but dont exspect to work at union only" there is a few of us union men that are planning to go north and Kindly please write me" all so I mail you one of my union cards hoping to heare from you soon I am respectfully, Yours.

Memphis Tennessee April 23, 1917

Gentlemen: I want to get in tuch with you in regard of good location & a job i am for race elevation every way. I want a job in a small town some where in north where I can receive very good wages and where I can educate my 3 little girls and demand respect of intelegence. I prefer a job as cabinet maker or any kind of furniture mfg. if possible. Let me hear from you all at once please. State minimum wages and kind of work. Yours truly,

Sherman, Ga., Nov. 28, 1916

Dear Sir: This letter comes to ask for all infirmations concerning employment in your connection in the warmest climate. Now I am in a family of (11) eleven more or less boys and girls (men and women) mixed sizes who want to go north as soon as arrangements can be made and employment given places for shelter and so on (etc) now this are farming people they were raised on the farm and are good farm hands I of course have some experience and qualefication as a coman school teacher and hotel waiter and along few other lines.

I wish you would write me at your first chance and tell me if you can give us employment at what time and about what wages will you pay and what kind of arrangement can be made for our shelter. Tell me when can you best use us now or later.

Will you send us tickets if so on what terms and at what price what is the cost per head and by what route should we come. We are Negroes and try to show ourselves worthy of all we may get from any friendly source we endeavor to be true to all good causes, if you can we thank you to help us to come north as soon as you can.

Sanford, Fla., April 27, 1917

Dear sir. I have seen through the Chicago Defender that you and the people of Chicago are helping newcomers. I am asking you for some information about conditions in some small town near Chicago.

There are some families here thinking of moving up, and are desirous of knowing what to expect before leaving. Please state about treatment, work, rent and schools. Please answer at some spare time.

Anniston, Ala., April 23, 1917

Dear sir: Please gave me some infamation about coming north i can do any kind of work from a truck gardin to farming i would like to leave here and i cant make no money to leave I must make enough to live one please let me here from you at once i want to get where i can put my children in schol.

Cedar Grove, La., April 23, 1917

Dear sir: to day I was advise by the defendent offices in your city to communicate with you in regards to the labor for the colored of the south as I was lead to beleave that you was in position of firms of your city & your near by surrounding towns of Chicago. Please state me how is the times in & around Chicago place to locate having a family dependent on me for support. I am informed by the Chicago Defender a very valuable paper which has for its purpose the Uplifting of my race, and of which I am a constant reader and real lover, that you were in position to show some light to one in my condition.

Seeking a Northern Home. If this is true Kindly inform me by next mail the next best thing to do Being a poor man with a family to care for, I am not coming to live on flowry Beds of ease for I am a man who works and wish to make the best I can out of life I do not wish to come there

hoodwinked not knowing where to go or what to do so I Solicite your help in this matter and thanking you in advance for what advice you may be pleased to Give I am yours for success. P.S. I am presently employed in the I C RR⁴. Mail Department at Union Station this city.

Brookhaven, Miss., April 24, 1917

Gents: The cane growers of Louisiana have stopped the exodus from New Orleans, claiming shortage of labor which will result in a sugar famine⁵.

Now these laborers thus employed receive only 85 cents a day and the high cost of living makes it a serious question to live.

There is a great many race people around here who desires to come north but have waited rather late to avoid car fare, which they have not got, isnt there some way to get the concerns who wants labor, to send passes here or elsewhere so they can come even if they have to pay out of the first months wages? Please done publish this letter but do what you can towards helping them to get away. If the R. R. Co. would run a low rate excursion they could leave that way. Please ans.

Savannah, Ga., April 24, 1917

Sir: I saw an advertisement in the Chicago Ledger where you would send tickets to any one desireing to come up there. I am a married man with a wife only, and I am 38 years of age, and both of us have so far splendid health, and would like very much to come out there provided we could get good employment regarding the advertisement.

Fullerton, La., April 28, 1917

Dear sir: I was reading about you was neading labor ninety miles of Chicago what is the name of the place and what R R extends ther i wants to come north and i wants a stedy employment ther what doe you pay per day i dont no anything about molding works but have been working around machinery for 10 years. Let me no what doe you pay for such work and can you give me a job of that kind or a job at common labor and let me no your prices and how many hours for a day.

De Ridder, La., April 29, 1917

Dear sir: there is lots of us southern mens wants transportation and we want to leave ratway as soon as you let us here from you some of us is married mens who need work we would like to bring our wife with us there is 20 head of good mens want transportation and if you need us let us no by return mail we all are redy only wants here from you there may be more all of our peoples wont to leave here and i want you to send as much as 20 tickets any way I will get you up plenty

⁴ Illinois Central Railroad.

⁵ White southerners did everything they could to stop the loss of essentially unpaid African American laborers to northern industrial jobs. Towns and cities banned the Chicago Defender and other black newspapers, patrolled train stations and major roads and physically prevents African Americans from leaving, threatened family members of migrants, and killed northern labor agents sent down South to recruit African American men to work industrial jobs. At the behest of wealthy sugar planters, local law enforcement ensured African Americans working in the sugar fields did not leave for the North. They shut down the train depots and arrested black men on the suspicion they might be leaving.

hands to do most any kind of work all you have to do is to send for them. looking to here from you. This is among uscollerd.

Atlanta, Ga., April 30, 1917

Dear Sir: In reading the Chicago Defender I find that there are many jobs open for workmen, I wish that you would or can secure me a position in some of the northern cities; as a workman and not as a loafer. One who is willing to do any kind of hard in side or public work, have had broad experience in machinery and other work of the kind. A some what alround man can also cook, well trained devuloped man; have travel extensively through the western and southern states; A good strong morial religious man no habits. I will accept transportation on advance and deducted from my wages later. It does not matter where, that is; as to city, country, town or state since you secure the positions. I am quite sure you will be delighted in securing a position for a man of this description. I'll assure you will not regret of so doing. Hoping to hear from you soon.

Houston, Tx. April 30, 1917

Dear Sir: wanted to leave the South and Go any Place where a man will be any thing Except a Ker I thought would write you for Advise as where would be a Good Place for a Comporedly young man That want to Better his Standing who has a very Promising young Family.

I am 30 years old and have Good Experience in Freight Handler and Can fill Position from Truck to Agt. would like Chicago or Philadelphia But I dont Care where so long as I Go where a man is a man.

Beaumont, Texas, May 7, 1917

Dear Sir: I see in one of your recent issue of collored men woanted in the North I wish you would help me to get a position in the North I have no trade I have been working for one company eight years and there is no advancement here for me and I would like to come where I can better my condition I woant work and not affraid to work all I wish is a chance to make good. I believe I would like machinist helper or Molder helper. If you can help me in any way it will be highly appreciate hoping to hear from you soon.

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