

Early Twentieth Century Afro-American Migration to Washington, D.C.

by Spencer R. Crew

After 1915 Afro-Americans living in the South began moving north in unprecedented numbers. Relocating primarily to urban areas in the northern and eastern sections of the United States, these newcomers often more than doubled the Afro-American population in these cities. While this migration enriched already existing Black communities, it complicated the relationship between Black and White residents. As the Afro-American population grew, it created increased competition for jobs and housing, sparking resentment among some White residents. The growing impact of Black voters, however, made them a factor in the eyes of local politicians. Their demands for fairer treatment pushed civil rights and antidiscrimination issues to the forefront of legislative discussions.

Deteriorating conditions in the South in part prompted the northward migration. Jim Crow laws in southern states segregated Afro-Americans, making them second class citizens. Voting regulations like the poll tax and literacy test excluded Blacks from the ballot box. Sharecropping placed them deep in debt and under the control of local landlords, and the threat of physical harm at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan intimidated anyone pressing for equality.

Faced with these living conditions, many Afro-Americans considered leaving the South, but little opportunity existed elsewhere in the country prior to 1915. With World War I these circumstances changed, as the demand for war goods expanded the labor needs of northern industries. Black workers from the South attracted the attention of northern industrialists, who actively recruited them to help fill the demand for new laborers. In cities like New York, Chicago and Pittsburgh these recruitment efforts resulted in tremendous increases in Afro-American populations during and after World War I.

In Washington, D.C., the war did not quite have the same effect. Unlike many northern cities, the District lacked an abundance of industrial jobs. Automobile manufacturing, steel production and other heavy industries did not dominate Washington's economy. Consequently, economic opportunities did not open up as rapidly for Afro-Americans in Washington as they did in other urban areas. Most Black men who found work during the war toiled as laborers in the building trades,

as chauffeurs or as servants. Black women faced even more restricted choices: at least seventy percent of them held domestic or personal service positions. While some Afro-Americans acquired positions with the federal government, they did not benefit from the expansion of government positions during the war to the same extent as their White counterparts.

The limited opportunities available to Afro-Americans influenced the degree to which southerners chose to settle in the District. Between 1910 and 1920 the Black population in Washington increased by only eighteen percent (from 94,000 to 110,000), while in Detroit, the home of Ford Motor Company, it grew by more than 600 percent. Ironically, Washington had the largest Afro-American population of any American city in 1910 but attracted fewer migrants than many others.

Most of the newcomers settling in the District arrived from Virginia, South Carolina, North Carolina and Georgia. Transportation systems connecting these places to Washington made travel relatively easy. Trains brought many migrants to the city, as the Southern, Seaboard-Atlantic and Airline Railroads serviced southern states along the Atlantic coast and transported migrants to their terminals in Washington. Afro-Americans living near or in port cities like Savannah, Charleston and Newport News traveled to Washington by ship, taking advantage of the services of such companies as the Old Bay Line or the Old Dominion Steamship Company. Both train and ship fares were relatively inexpensive, and ship travel even included overnight accommodations.

Migrants who settled in Washington learned about the city through letters or visits home by friends and relatives. As the city's Black newspaper, the *Washington Bee*, noted in its "News Notes" column, local residents frequently made trips back south. Weddings, christenings, homecoming activities and funerals usually provided the impetus for these visits. During their stay visitors talked about their positive experiences in the North and the many opportunities available, encouraging others to leave. While migrating meant leaving behind family, friends and strong community ties, it offered the possibility of greater opportunities for individuals willing to take a chance.

Migrants to Washington and other cities usually



Migrants headed north full of excitement and hope about the future that awaited them. Photo courtesy Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration

stayed with family members or friends. Chain migration, or relocating to the same place where a family member or friend resided, provided an important support system for newcomers. Adjusting to the pace of life and new ways of doing things in any city was difficult, so living near family helped ease the transition. Through the contacts provided by already established Afro-American residents, migrants received information about job opportunities, places to live, child care and social conventions around the city.

Because the District presented many problems for Black residents, newcomers to Washington needed this help. After the turn of the century, discrimination in the city increased. Under the presidency of Woodrow Wilson segregation in government offices grew dramatically, as separate work areas and restrooms became the norm. Black school children attended separate schools and played in segregated park areas. In the private sector, downtown stores served Black customers in segregated areas and forced them to purchase clothing without allowing them to try it on. After the war, circumstances deteriorated further, as a race riot, initiated by White servicemen, took place in July of 1919. Six years later,

with the consent of local officials, the Ku Klux Klan led a massive parade through the streets of Washington.

Significantly, within the city there existed an Afro-American community which functioned apart from an oftentimes hostile White population. This was the world into which family and friends introduced newcomers. It included a myriad of institutions, organizations and community groups which offered alternative forms of entertainment and social interaction for Black Washington residents. Most important among these institutions were churches – places like Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church, Asbury Methodist, Metropolitan Baptist, Vermont Avenue Baptist and Shiloh Baptist Church. Their religious services and related activities provided important outlets for local residents. The Phyllis Wheatley Y.W.C.A. offered shelter, food and training for newcomers to the city. Activities sponsored by the Southwest Settlement House, the Federation of Civic Associations, the Mutual South Literary Club, the Howard Theater and other organizations offered additional activities and support for both newcomers and long-established residents.

This Washington community atmosphere, with its

rich traditions and strong support networks, is what attracted migrants to the District during and after World War I. Within its confines Afro-Americans married and raised families, protested against mistreatment, educated their children, went to work and performed the daily routines typical of other Washington residents. Even without the increase in jobs available elsewhere Washington offered other attractions to potential migrants, enticing newcomers to the city during and after World War I.

During the Depression, Roosevelt's New Deal programs offered fresh incentives to prospective migrants. These programs, which promoted construction and other economic activities around the District, brought a new wave of migrants to the city. Construction companies in particular recruited heavily in the South for Afro-American laborers. As a result, while migration to other cities slowed during the Depression years, it increased in the District, as the city's Black population rose forty-eight percent between 1930 and 1940.

With the start of World War II, migration patterns to Washington more closely paralleled the movement of migrants to other cities in the North and West. After 1940 Washington's Afro-American population steadily increased in size, as economic opportunities broadened and the struggle for improved civil rights broke down many of the barriers which previously held back Black residents. The 1954 Supreme Court decision, for example, brought an end to school segregation in the District. By 1960 the Afro-American population in Washington numbered more than 400,000 and constituted a majority of the residents in the city.

While the in-migration of Afro-Americans to Washington varied in intensity during the 20th century, the pattern of migration did not change appreciably. Migrants came to the city primarily because they knew someone living there who could help them adjust to a new environment. Their contacts linked them into support networks of individuals, institutions and organizations which made this transition less jarring. While migrants moved for a variety of reasons, ranging from fear of violence to the desire for a better job, *where* they moved depended a great deal upon whom they knew and trusted. Personal connections were an important reason why they settled in Washington even during weak economic periods and why Washington's Black population grew steadily during the 20th century.

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Suggested reading

Borchert, James. *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980.

Crew, Spencer. *Field to Factory: Afro-American Migration 1915-1940*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1987.

Green, Constance McLaughlin. *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967.