

Sample essay on the great migration

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



Between the years 1916 and 1970, over six million African Americans moved from their rural homes in the states that had joined the confederacy to cities all across the West, Midwest and North, bringing a significant effect to life in American cities. Given the fact that the Civil War had ended slavery and brought not only freedom but the right to vote to the former slaves, one might think that such a migration would not happen. However, the promise of freedom for the former slaves really only lasted about a dozen years after the Confederate surrender at Appomattox Courthouse. Between 1865 and 1876, the Union Army remained in occupation throughout much of the South, and its purpose was to follow the Radical Republican agenda and actively enforce the freedoms for the former slaves. However, this would come to an end after the Presidential election of 1876 (Christensen 2011, web). Samuel Tilden and Rutherford B. Hayes were the Democratic and Republican candidates, respectively, and they were the top two finishers according to the electoral college in that election. However, neither of them won a majority of the total number of electoral votes available, which meant that the election went to the House of Representatives for final resolution. Each state receives one vote in the House when this happens, and the states that had been in the Confederacy agreed to throw their support to Hayes if the Republicans would stop enforcing equality in the South - in other words, to bring the movement known as Reconstruction to an end. Hayes took the deal and embarked on a mostly forgettable four years in the White House, but for the former slaves, a century of renewed discrimination began, as states began implementing segregationist laws that would lead to everything from separate school systems to separate water fountains for blacks and whites,

and not only economic opportunity but also the right simply to live freely would elude blacks throughout the South (Christensen 2011, web). This is why so many of them, after giving up on their own states to do the right thing and allow them to thrive, decided to leave the South. As a result, New York City, Chicago and other major urban areas began to see significant increases in population, thanks to the increase in available jobs that appeared in the industrial sector after World War I. While blacks had to compete with recent immigrants for places to live as well as jobs, African Americans start to construct a new niche within public life, taking on social, political and economic challenges and establishing a strong culture that would influence events heavily throughout the next decades.

The segregationist laws that sprang up across the South after the end of Reconstruction included a mandate that the former slaves work on the land as sharecroppers (Lepore 2010). In some ways, this was even less promising a way of life than slavery; as slaves, the African Americans had had places to live and food to eat, because it was in their owners' interests to keep them healthy; slaves who had the right diet and living conditions could complete work a lot more efficiently. In the sharecropping system, if one person fell by the wayside, either through injury or through a lack of desire to complete the work, there were others standing ready to take his job and fill that position. Also, the Ku Klux Klan, which had apparently stopped operations in 1869, remained a force undergrounds (Lepore 2010). The practices of intimidation for which it had become known in its early days, including acts of violence (as well as lynching) emerged again in the late 1800s and early 1900s. And so when World War I began in Europe, the United States remained

neutral. However, the demand for industrial production began to increase. The hostilities across the sea brought the influx of immigrants from Europe to a halt, meaning that the new industrial jobs in the United States needed domestic laborers to fill them, and African-Americans were all too glad to leave the South and fill those positions up north. Ads appeared in black publications, such as the Chicago Defender, letting readers know about the large number of opportunities available to people from the former Confederacy.

While the Great Migration would take more than 50 years to complete, in the first three years, one million out of the eventual six million had already moved out of the South, most of them in buses, boats or train, while others traveled in cars or on carts pulled by a horse. New York City grew by 66 percent between 1910 and 1920; other cities grew as well (Chicago, 148 percent; Detroit, 611 percent; Philadelphia, 500 percent) (Great Migration). A lot of the newly arrived African Americans took jobs that were extremely difficult and dangerous, such as the positions along the assembly lines in meatpacking plants, factories and foundries, where injuries were common and (in an era before workman's compensation) often brought an end to one's working career. Women had a more difficult time finding jobs, but many of them entered domestic work positions, spurring more competition in that area as well.

In the North, West and Midwest, racial segregation was not legal (like it was in the South), which means that you wouldn't find separate school systems and sections on a city bus, but that does not mean that racism was not present. In fact, many real estate owners in the North would still refuse to

rent dwellings to African Americans or would only do so at an extreme premium. Some neighborhoods even came up with covenant agreements that compelled white owners of property to agree not to sell to blacks. These covenants would not be found unconstitutional until the Supreme Court eliminated them in 1948. During the summer of 1919, the combination of a new burst in activity by the Ku Klux Klan and an increase in rents led to one of the largest times of racial strife. One Chicago riot in July of 1919 raged for almost two full weeks. When it finally died down, 38 people had died, 537 had suffered injuries and more than 1, 000 black families needed a place to live.

Because the Great Migration caused so much tension within public housing, a lot of the blacks who moved to New York would end up building their own smaller cities within the larger metropolises, and so a new culture that was uniquely urban and uniquely African-American began to develop (Lemann 2011). Perhaps the best example of this was the Harlem Renaissance, which ended up bringing a terrific impact to the overall culture of this point in time. Such terrific artists as Langston Hughes and Paul L. Dunbar would never have had the opportunity to work, let alone become icons in the world of letters (Lawrence 1995). The Great Migration also created a higher level of political activism within the African American community. After decades of disenfranchisement and repression in the South, the Great Migration helped people find a new way to live in America's biggest cities. During the 1930s, African American migration trailed off, as the Great Depression affected many people's ability to move and bring improvement to their lives. However, when World War II arrived, the migration began again (Lemann

2011). When the migration finally came to an end in 1970, the impact it had brought to demographic trends was amazing. In 1900, 90 percent of African Americans were in the South, and 75 percent of all African Americans dwelt in rural areas. By 1970, though, more than half of the country's African Americans had moved out of the South, and only 25 percent of those who remained in the South still lived in rural parts of the country (Christensen 2011, web).

It is important to take a look back at the reasons for this seismic shift in the population. Before the Civil War, the slaves in states like Alabama and Mississippi would have led grim lives indeed. They would wake up before dark and begin performing chores, but unlike their free counterparts, the slaves were at the whim of their owner and overseers, and the wrong look or gesture could lead a slave all the way to death, if the owner or the overseer saw fit (Wormser 2012, web). The fact that the Civil War brought an end to this, only to have the oppressive white establishment use the laws of the land against African Americans once again, was a major factor in the Great Migration.

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