Midwest Social Sciences Journal

Volume 24 | Issue 1 Article 4

2021

Looking for Better: A History of Black Southern Migrations

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Invited Scholarly Essay

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ABSTRACT

A broad overview of migrations affecting black southerners is presented, including the Atlantic slave trade, the domestic slave trade, colonization movements to Sierra Leone and Liberia, the Exoduster movement, the Great Migration, and the Return South migration. Emigrants convey their experiences and motivations through testimonies and personal accounts. Surviving the trauma of forced migrations, black southerners organized numerous migration movements both outside and within American polities in search of better opportunities. In the late 20th century, black southerners also initiated a return migration to the American South and have since achieved notable socioeconomic and political progress.

KEY WORDS Slave Trade; Migration; South

The eminent historian Carter G. Woodson, also known as the Father of Black History, called the 20th century a century of Negro migration. Witnessing the early years of the African American Great Migration, he wrote, "The migration of the Negro from the southern states to those offering them better opportunities is nothing new" (Woodson 1918:1). Woodson's prediction could not have been more accurate, and though writing more than one hundred years ago, his analysis of black southern migration movements from the 19th to the early 20th centuries is still credible. Black Americans, particularly black southerners, have long been a nation on the move, and their history has been one of successive migrations. Since the inception of the United States, they have been "looking for better." They sought out better housing for their families, better wages with which to support those families, better schools for their children, better land to farm, better markets from which to buy and sell, better treatment from others, and better conditions in which to live and work—in short, better opportunities for themselves and their progeny.

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The first migration that blacks undertook, however, was not of their own volition. They were forced, beginning more than 400 years ago, on the coasts of West and Central West Africa. Originally published in 1789, Olaudah Equiano's autobiography is the earliest English literary work by an African author recounting the trauma of the Middle Passage:

> The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were sound by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, (which was very different from any I had ever heard) united to confirm me in this belief. Indeed such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country. (p. 71)

During the Atlantic slave trade, from 1441 to 1884, approximately 12 million Africans were forcibly transported to Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas. Before the 19th century, this movement of African peoples constituted the largest migration of peoples to the New World. In no small part because of forced African labor, Europeans were able to establish permanent settlements in what would become the United States, Brazil, and the other countries in the Western Hemisphere.

Enslaved Africans came from the Senegambia, along the Senegal and Gambia Rivers; the Bight of Benin, near the Ivory Coast; the Bight of Biafra, in Nigeria; the Windward Coast of Liberia and Sierra Leone; and Central Africa along the Congo Basin. Even after they survived the Middle Passage, black Americans' sojourn was not yet complete. Again separated from kin and communities, hundreds of thousands of black people, in an internal domestic slave trade, would be traded from colonies in the Chesapeake to the Old Southwest states of Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi; to the Upper South states of Tennessee and Kentucky; and to the central American west states of Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas. "Sold down river," black southerners resurrected new lives and communities in their forced migration westward (Berlin 2010:100–102).

Charles Ball recalled the scene in Calvert County, Maryland, when his mother was sold to a Georgia trader:

> My mother then turned to him and cried, "Oh, master, do not take me from my child!" Without making any reply, he

> gave her two or three heavy blows on the shoulders with his raw hide, snatched me from her arms, handed me to my master, and seizing her by one arm, dragged her back towards the place of sale. My master then quickened the pace of his horse; and as we advanced, the cries of my poor parent became more and more indistinct—at length they died away in the distance, and I never again heard the voice of my poor mother. (Ball 1837:17–18)

Charles was four years old at the time, and although history does not record the age of his mother, if statistics are correct, she was probably not over the age of 29, as enslavers looked for "young and likely Negroes" who could perform hard labor right away.

Black Americans made roads where previously there had been no paths, made homesteads where before lay only wilderness, and made lives where others had decreed desolation. One can only imagine the feelings of angst, fear, and disconsolation from leaving loved ones and home, separated, never to see each other again. In some estimates, approximately one third of enslaved persons sold "down south" in a New Orleans slave market originated from the Chesapeake (Baptist 2014:175–79).

Each person sold carried with them, always etched into their mind, the memories of that dreaded day. Francis Fedric, who was born in Virginia and sold to Kentucky, recalled "men and women down on their knees begging to be purchased to go with their wives or husbands … children crying and imploring not to have their parents sent away from them; but all their beseeching and tears were of no avail. They were ruthlessly separated, most of them for ever" (Fedric 1863:14–15). Children torn from parents, spouses ripped away from one another; the trauma of slavery lives on in black psyches.

In spite of these hardships, black southerners would begin anew: new paths, new communities, new families and lineages. After the forced migrations of the Atlantic slave trade and the United States' internal trade, the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1865 finally granted freedom to black Americans. Since then, for more than 150 years, they have been "looking for better," and for black southerners in particular, *better* most often meant land and the economic independence that it entailed.

In 1868, blacks in Eufaula, Alabama, petitioned the U.S. Senate to help them emigrate out of the South: "Having been set free from slavery by the blessing of Almighty God and an act of Congress, we are desirous on account of the animosity evinced towards us a people, and the injustice and oppression to which we are obliged to submit, and which wrongs are likely to continue so long as we remain here" ("Petitions from Colored People" 1868). They could not remain, but where could they go? Where could better be found?

Some looked to Africa and the countries of Sierra Leone and Liberia, which had been founded by black southerners looking for better. The first southern black emigrants had left the American colonies to become free landowners during the Revolutionary War. Many of the black southern loyalists who allied with the British had originally settled in Nova Scotia in the 1780s. In the 1790s, they relocated yet again, this time to the west coast of Africa in the colony of Sierra Leone.

David George was an early black leader in the movement of blacks from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone. Born a slave in Virginia in the 1740s, George lived throughout the South, being bought and sold numerous times during his 40 years as an American slave, first in Virginia, then South Carolina and eventually Georgia. George is credited with helping found the first black Baptist congregation in the United States, the Silver Bluff Baptist Church, in South Carolina in 1775 and also with establishing the First African Baptist Church in Savannah in 1783. In his memoirs, he recalled the decision of blacks in Nova Scotia to go to Sierra Leone, stating, "The greatest part of us were pleased and willing to go" (George [1793] 2002:188).

If black southerners were unwilling to go to Sierra Leone with the British, then perhaps another African destination such as Liberia would suffice. Liberia was originally a colony of the American Colonization Society before gaining independence in 1847. Supported by both enslavers and abolitionists, it sought to colonize free blacks on the west coast of Africa south of the British Sierra Leone colony. Some prominent black leaders supported emigration to Liberia, including Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, the first AME bishop elected in the South, who led the AME Church during one of the most transformative periods in its history.

Bishop Turner did not hold any qualms about speaking critically of American race relations. In 1868, before the Georgia state legislature, the men who had overseen the mass persecution of blacks since the close of the Civil War and could likely violate his safety, he boldly exclaimed,

> Mr. Speaker: Before proceeding to argue this question upon its intrinsic merits, I wish the members of this House to understand the position that I take. I hold that I am a member of this body. Therefore, sir, I shall neither fawn nor cringe before any party, nor stoop to beg them for my rights. Some of my colored fellow members, in the course of their remarks, took occasion to appeal to the sympathies of members on the opposite side, and to eulogize their character for magnanimity. It reminds me very much, sir, of slaves begging under the lash. I am here to demand my rights and to hurl thunderbolts at the men who would dare to cross the threshold of my manhood. There is an old aphorism which says, "fight the devil with fire," and if I should observe the rule in this instance, I wish gentlemen to understand that it is but fighting them with their own weapon. (Turner 1868)

For this and undoubtedly other racial transgressions, Turner later received threats from the Ku Klux Klan. Those who did not live it did not understand the sheer terror that freed people had to endure. In 1871, Turner testified to the U.S. Congress about postwar conditions in the South:

> Question. How many murders do you suppose have been committed in this State, of colored people, since the spring of 1868?
>
> Answer. If you will allow me to go a little behind that, to say from the time reconstruction commenced.
>
> Question. Well, do that.
>
> Answer. We held a Southern States convention week before last in Columbia, South Carolina, at which place there were delegates from all the Southern States. We met together at the request of the committee on murders and outrages, and according to the best of our knowledge and belief it was estimated that since reconstruction between fifteen hundred and sixteen hundred had been perpetrated.
>
> Question. In the South?
>
> Answer. No; in the State of Georgia.
>
> Question. How many in all the Southern States?
>
> Answer. It was estimated that there had been not less than twenty thousand. That number is what we all agree upon when considering that question. Every delegation made an estimate of the probable amount of murders in their respective States. Of course it was only an estimate, to the best of our belief. (U.S. Congress 1872:1041–1042)

Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, born and reared in the South, understood and spoke to the distresses of poor black southerners. Three years after his testimony about the appalling treatment of blacks in the region, Exoduster Fever and the migration to the American West began.

In times past, the western frontier was where traditional social mores and established racial etiquette receded while the hard work of forging a new nation was carried out. Taking its name from the Old Testament, the Exoduster Movement saw tens of thousands of black southerners from Mississippi, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Arkansas migrate to the areas of Kansas, Indiana, Oklahoma, and other western and midwestern regions. Kansas had a unique place in black collective memory. The home of radical abolitionist John Brown and of a vigilante war in the 1850s that foreshadowed the national conflict to come, Kansas held an esteemed place in the black southern imagination. During the 1870s and 1880s, tens of thousands set out for the new state (Painter 1994).

In the mid-1870s, under the leadership of Pap Singleton, black Tennesseans began emigrating in ever-increasing numbers. Though Singleton focused on farming, his message had an innate political overture. He stated in a newspaper, "The whites had the lands and the sense, and de blacks had nothing but their freedom." Singleton believed that blacks "ought to be trying to get homes of their own, lands of their own, instead of depending on renting from their former masters or subsisting" (Negro Exodus Papers). For Singleton and many other black southerners, political freedom was useless without the economic autonomy to ensure it could be exercised. Though the Exoduster Movement was a massive migration out of the South, another movement, a larger movement, was still to come.

Beginning during the World War I era, the Great Migration was the largest voluntary migration by black southerners. Proceeding in waves until the 1970s, it encompassed migrations not only from south to north but also from south to west and from rural to urban. By the end of the 20th century, for the first time, more black Americans lived in cities than in the countryside. As agricultural employment was cut by more than half, in part because of mechanization, black southerners looked for better beyond southern borders and sought to leave behind the poverty, unequal education, and Jim Crow policies that had circumscribed their childhoods.

Those who were the first in their families or communities to go paved the way for others to follow. They were quickly joined by younger brothers and sisters, distant nieces and nephews, cousins, and in-laws also seeking to establish themselves. As one potential emigrant from Houston, Texas, put it, he "wanted to leave the South and Go and Place where a man will Be any thing Except A Ker." He looked for "a Good Place for a Comporedly young man That want to Better his Standing," a place, in his eyes, "where a man is a man" (Scott 1919:298).

Perhaps better truly was located elsewhere, so black southerners purchased tickets and followed the rail lines. A direct line was the cheapest, accordingly. For people from the Carolinas, Florida, and Georgia, the destination was often on the East Coast: New York City, Boston, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, or Philadelphia. For those hailing from middle Tennessee or Alabama, the train stopped in Cleveland and Detroit; it was California for Texans and Louisianans; and Chicago and Milwaukee lay ahead for those black Mississippians and Arkansians brave enough and "sick and tired enough" to make the journey.

Near the close of the 20th century, yet another migration commenced—a return migration to the South. Today, black southerners are able to be not only landowners but also entrepreneurs and leaders in the land of their forefathers. Betrayed by the promises of equal education, affordable housing, and respectability in the North, many found not legal but de facto segregation in public schools, housing in racial ghettos, and communities rife with class prejudice. Black southerners returned to the South, to the land enriched by the blood and sweat of their ancestors, the land on which their fathers and mothers had been born, had toiled, and are buried.

Black prosperity has come home to the South. More black businesses are created and operate in the South than anywhere else in the United States, and the South is home to more black politicians—mayors, city council members, police chiefs, state representatives, and school board members (Reed 1984). Despite the South's history of

racism, or perhaps because of it, southerners both black and white acknowledge a history of racial bias and evince policies to overcome it, arguably more so than other areas of the country. Likewise, in the South, where white property-holding men have always received privilege, it is worth noting that someone who was once called boy or girl for a large portion of their life is now referred to as sir and mister or ma'am and missus by the same folks who sought to demean them before. In the 21st century, perhaps, black southerners will not need to look for better but can rest easier and be satisfied in knowing that they have finally found it.

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