The Great Migration

The Great Migration was the migration of thousands of African-Americans from the South to the North. African Americans were looking to escape the problems of racism in the South and felt they could seek out better jobs and an overall better life in the North. It is estimated that over 1 million African-Americans participated in this mass movement.

The Great Migration created the first large, urban black communities in the North. The North saw its black population rise about 20 percent between 1910 and 1930. Cities such as Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Cleveland saw some of the biggest increases.

World War I and boll weevils were major factors in pulling blacks to the North. The war created a huge demand for labor in the North when it caused millions of men to leave their jobs to serve in the armed forces and forced immigration to slow down. In the South, a boll weevil infestation of the cotton crop that ruined harvests and threatened thousands of African Americans with starvation also caused people to head North.

Railroad companies were so desperate for help that they paid African Americans' travel expenses to the North. While northern labor agents traveled to the South to encourage blacks to leave and go find jobs in the North.

With black labor leaving the South in large numbers, southern planters tried to prevent the outflow, but were ultimately unsuccessful. The more progressive southern employers tried to promise better pay and improved treatment. Others tried to intimidate blacks, even going so far as to board northbound trains and to attack black men and women to try to force them into returning to the South.

Despite the jobs and housing available in the North, the challenges of living in an urban environment were daunting for many of the new migrants.

The stream of migrants continued apace, however, until the Great Depression and World War II caused northern demand for workers to slacken.

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In 1890, almost 95% of all African Americans lived in the South and some 90% of them lived in rural areas. By the 1960s, 90% of all African Americans lived outside the South and 95% lived in urban areas. This dramatic change has come to be known as the Great Migration. The population change came in two different waves. The first was associated with World War I, when European immigration slowed to almost nothing leaving northern industrialists without enough workers. African Americans came north to fill those jobs. Pressures inside the South such as Jim Crow laws and the weakness of Southern agriculture also led African Americans to move north. In a society where lynchings and the legal system prohibited both
advancement and protest, abandoning the South provided an opportunity to do both.

Certain African Americans in the North also encouraged the migration. Robert Abbott of the Chicago Defender, for example, used his newspaper to crusade against the injustices of the South and to encourage Southerners to come North where choices were greater and oppression less. Outlawed in some Southern counties, the Defender made Chicago one of the cities that became home to large numbers of African Americans along with New York, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and others.

Many whites did not welcome their new neighbors. A 1908 riot in Springfield, Illinois, helped spur the formation of the NAACP. The Urban League was formed in 1910 to protect the interests of these migrants in northern cities. Their efforts did not, however, prevent the spread of violence. In 1917, East St. Louis, Illinois, experienced a riot that led to the deaths of at least 39 African Americans and 2 whites. In 1919, riots took place several places, the largest in Chicago and Washington, D.C.

The second wave began at the end of the Great Depression and the beginning of World War II. Still a rural to urban migration, destinations now included the cities of the West Coast as well as the older urban centers.

http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/history/reiff/13c/20thgtmi.html

Although chattel slavery had been illegal for three decades by the 1890s, southern blacks often felt that a new kind of de facto slavery had taken its place. Lynchings, Jim Crow laws, and economic hardship made southern blacks feel as if very little had improved since emancipation. Beginning in the 1890s and lasting well into the 1970s, a "Great Migration" of southern blacks to the West and North changed the demographic structure of the nation. Blacks turned to the "Promised Land" of the North in search of jobs and greater racial toleration.

The "Great Migration" increased dramatically in the years between about 1910 and the early 1920s. Between 300,000 and 1,000,000 African-Americans moved north during this period, largely in response to an increased number of unskilled factory job openings as northern manufacturers boosted production for World War I. Black migration between 1916 and the 1960s remained strong, except during the Great Depression. More than 6 million southern blacks made the move to the North during this period.