

The Second Great Migration

The Second Great Migration (1940-1970) is considered by historians as the sequel to the **Great Migration** (1910-1930). While both had a tremendous impact on the lives of African Americans, the second migration was much larger in scale and dissimilar in character to the initial migration and arguably affected the lives of African Americans much more. The second migration precipitated a more enduring transformation of American life for both blacks and whites; many of the factors that spurred migration remained the same. The economy, jobs, and racial discrimination remained top factors for black migration to the North. The advent of World War II contributed to an exodus out of the South, with 1.5 million African Americans leaving during the 1940s, a pattern of migration which would continue at that pace for the next twenty years. The result would be the increased urbanization of the African American population, with fewer blacks working in agriculture or domestic labor, occupations in which the black race had previously been concentrated.

Economic Conditions

The New Deal's efforts to rescue the Southern agricultural industry in the 1930s essentially backfired and forever transformed the region's economy. Dire economic conditions in the South necessitated the move to the North for many black families. The expansion of industrial production during World War II and the further mechanization of the agricultural industry, in part, spurred the Second Great Migration.

The **Agricultural Adjustment Act** (1938) had intended to help the South by paying farmers subsidies to not plant a portion of their land, thereby reducing the crop surplus and raising the value of the crop. While on the surface this was a sound plan, a major negative effect of the law was that it eliminated many jobs on which African Americans relied. The reduction in planted acreage meant that fewer workers were needed to harvest the crops. Also, the subsidies that the federal government gave the farmers induced them to reconsider mechanization, which up until that point had been very costly. But now with a guaranteed profit coming from government subsidies, farmers had little reason not to mechanize. This increased



[Employment of Negroes in Agriculture](#) 1934,
Earle Richardson, oil on canvas, Smithsonian
American Art Museum

mechanization of the farming industry further reduced the need for agricultural workers. Additionally by 1940, the United States was no longer producing the majority of the world's cotton, the primary money-making crop of the South. In fact, the South itself no longer remained the chief producer of cotton in the United States, with production shifting to California and Arizona.

Employment Opportunities

An opportunity for good, steady employment was one of the main reasons for African-Americans to pack up their belongings and move north. After all, jobs were vital in providing food, clothes, and shelter for families. The mobilization of the American wartime economy in 1942 produced more than \$100 billion in government contracts in just six months, creating a plethora of new job opportunities in the North, the predominant area of manufacturing. Industrial hubs such as New York City, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and Detroit were attractive due to the number of jobs available to blacks. During World War II over 1 million African Americans would join the workforce.

Industrial jobs were particularly appealing to younger African Americans because of the assistance they could receive through free government training programs sponsored by the **National Youth Administration**. The agency, part of the **Works Progress Administration**, aimed to train and educate American youth, ages 16-25. Unlike its counterpart, the **Civilian Conservation Corps**, the National Youth Administration was open to women looking for education and career opportunities. Of the 1 million African Americans who found work during the war in industrial occupations, 600,000 were women.

Racism and Violence

In addition to the terrible economic conditions, Southern blacks wished to move North because of the Jim Crow laws and continued racial violence in the South. A letter published in the **Chicago Defender** summed up the fear felt in that region: "Dear Sir, I indeed wish to come to the North – anywhere in Illinois will do so long as I'm away from the hangman's noose and the torch man's fire. Conditions here are horrible with us. I want to get my family out of this accursed Southland. Down here a Negro man's not as good as a white man's dog."

While the North certainly had its share of racism, the South by comparison was unequivocally hostile to African Americans. Family and friends who had previously made the journey wrote to their loved ones in the South, writing about their wonderful new lives in the North and the opportunities that existed, "Hello Dr., my dear old friend. These moments I thought I would write you a few facts of the present conditions in the North. People are coming here every day

and finding employment. Nothing here but money – and it’s not hard to get. I have children in school every day with the white children. However are times there now?”

Glossary

Agricultural Adjustment Act: (1938) a New Deal era law which reduced agricultural production by paying farmers subsidies to not plant part of their land in order to reduce crop surplus, therefore effectively raise the value of crops.

Civilian Conservation Corps: a New Deal era public relief program for males ages 18-23. The Corps provided unskilled manual labor jobs relating to the conservation and development of natural resources. This provided aid to families recovering from the Depression and at the same time implemented a natural resources conservation program in each state.

Chicago Defender: founded in 1905, a historically black newspaper for African-American readers. The paper played a major role in the Great Migration, promoting Northern cities as preferable destinations.

Great Migration: (1910-1930) the first wave of African-American migration to the North from the South.

National Youth Administration: a New Deal agency that provided employment and education for citizens ages 16-25; part of the Works Progress Administration.

Works Progress Administration: the largest New Deal agency that employed millions of people to carry out public works projects. These projects included roads, public buildings, bridges, dams and more.