This audio documentary focuses on the reminiscences of African American migrants from the rural southern United States to the northern cities between 1915 and 1951. The story is told by the migrants themselves, in their own words. We learn of their hopes and dreams as well as their fears and disappointments. Through their lives we hear in firsthand dramatic detail the human story of this pivotal event in African American history. Produced by David Tarnow for the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, this documentary is narrated by the Museum's director, Spencer Crew.

Produced in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History and the permanent exhibit *Field to Factory,* which opened in 1987.

Enclosed is one audio tape and a 20-page illustrated booklet.

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field to **factory**

Voices of the Great Migration: Recalling the African American Migration to the Northern Cities

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Produced in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History and the exhibit Field to Factory.

Introduction *by David Tarnow*

Field to Factory: Voices of the Great Migration, based upon a permanent exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, documents the lives of four migrants who moved from the rural southern United States to the urban North sometime between the years 1915 and 1941. The stories, told by the migrants in their own words, describe life in the South, the trip North, and the new life they found and made for themselves.

ERLEEN LINDSAY worked on a farm and in a hotel in Alabama and then traveled to Chicago, where she worked in a restaurant kitchen.

WILLIAM BROWN, a carpenter from Florida, made the trip to New York and eventually moved to Philadelphia.

ERNESTINE WRIGHT was brought up on a farm in Arkansas and went to live with her sister in Detroit, where she worked as a housekeeper.

ALPHONSE OLIVE came from Tennessee, where he worked on his family farm, and then traveled to Chicago, where he found work in a steel mill.

Through the documentary, we get to know these four people well. We hear of their home lives and families, their work lives, their schools and churches. We hear of their hopes and dreams, their fears and disappointments. And through their lives we hear in firsthand dramatic detail the human story of this episode in Black American history.

For rural Blacks, the northern United States looked very appealing between the two world wars. Stories circulated about how easy it was up North to make double and triple the wages they were getting for backbreaking work in the South. And everybody had heard that as soon as you crossed the Mason-Dixon Line there were no laws institutionalizing segregation. So the trip North was invariably made with expectations of a better life.

However, most migrants were in for a cruel awakening when they discovered that their increase in wages did not go far in the expensive North. Likewise, the promise of social justice was found to be hollow. In the South, regardless of how hard farm work was you could always find enough food to eat, and there was cooperation and sharing among neighbors, both Black and White. But perhaps the most painful element the migrants faced in moving North was the fact that they were uprooted from their families, friends, and social institutions, as they had to cope with the strange, unfriendly way of life of the city. For many the adjustment took years; for some it never happened.

The music heard in this documentary was made available courtesy of Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings.

Field to Factory: African American Migration 1915-1940

by Johnnie Douthis

Between 1915 and 1940, hundreds of thousands of Black Americans left the South and migrated to the cities of the North. This movement, called the Great Migration, changed both the lives of the African American migrants and the racial status quo in much of the North. It led to the emergence of large, predominantly Black urban enclaves in the North and set the stage for life in today's northern cities. The Great Migration altered the very structure of American society and thrust the question of the "color line," as the noted scholar W. E. B. Du Bois labeled it, onto the national agenda.

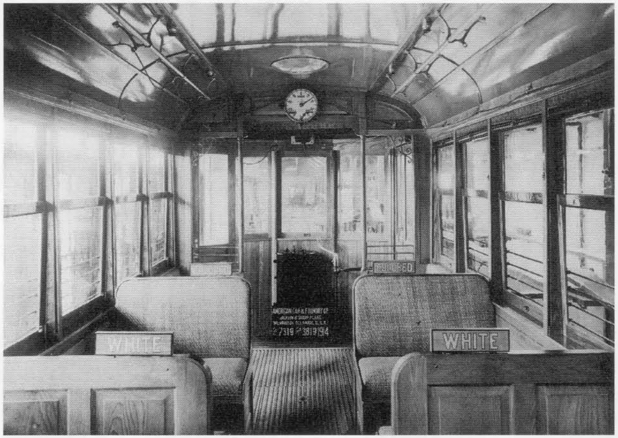
Although the Great Migration spawned important philosophical and social debates, it was first and foremost a movement of people, the result of hundreds of thousands of individual decisions to leave an old life behind in search of a brighter future.

The Great Migration was a movement within America, yet it paralleled the immigration experiences of other ethnic groups. Both migrants and immigrants carried their hopes and dreams, along with their cardboard suitcases and cloth bundles, into an uncertain existence. "Field to Factory," the permanent exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History upon which this documentary recording is based, gives voice to the uniqueness of the African American experience and yet echoes the immigration of all peoples.

Life in the South: Why Leave?

At the turn of the century, three-quarters of all Black Americans lived in the rural South. They were a crucial source of cheap labor in the region, but Black Americans seldom profited from their work. Very few owned their own homes or the land they farmed. For many African Americans, rural life was a deadening round of sharecropping and debt.

Black southerners also had to live with "Jim Crow"



(segregation) laws which in essence created a two-tiered system of citizenship in the South: one for Whites and a separate, more restricted one for Blacks. In this system of "Jim Crow" laws, African Americans had to remain in special, separate sections on transportation, in restaurants, and at movie theaters, under penalty of imprisonment and possible death. The Supreme Court even gave its approval to this system of segregation when in 1896, in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, it upheld the constitutionality of "separate but equal" facilities for Blacks and Whites.

In truth, the public facilities were far from equal. Schools for Black children were woefully inadequate. The majority of rural Black school systems served only the elementary grades, and even then for only three to five months of the year at the most. Since there were few public Black high schools in rural areas, parents were forced to establish and support private Black high schools. The majority of African American students, however, remained trapped in inferior public schools or were denied an education altogether. In addition to restrictive "Jim Crow" laws, difficult economic conditions, and poor educational facilities, Black people were also victims of violent attacks by Whites. The Ku Klux Klan and other groups further reinforced the second-class status of African Americans. Crosses burned in Black neighborhoods, public lynchings, and other threats of violence were a constant undercurrent in the lives of southern Blacks.

New Demands for Labor

During World War I, as production demands in the industrial North increased, many companies lost their main source of labor—migrants and White male workers. As an alternative, northern industrialists turned to the South and focused their recruitment efforts on southern Blacks and rural Whites. Southern Blacks learned of these new economic opportunities through labor recruiters, word of mouth from relatives and friends who already lived in the North, and northern Black newspapers.

Black newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *New York Age*, played an important role by running articles—aimed at Black southerners—about discrimination and the advantages of living in the North. But letters from the new northern residents proved to be the best source of information; in many instances, these messages were the deciding factor in whether or not one joined the Great Migration.

The Decision to Move

Making the decision to migrate North was never easy. Personal and economic factors complicated the decision. Despite poor living and working conditions in the South, African Americans were sustained by strong community and family ties. Deciding to migrate, therefore, was never a simple matter of choosing whether or not to endure or escape segregation, a lack of economic opportunities, a poor educational system, and other problems. Many chose to leave despite the strong pull of family and community ties while these same bonds kept many at home in the South.

The Great Migration cut across the spectrum of the Black population. Farmers, college graduates, and servicemen headed North. Service in the military (an opportunity for young Black men to show patriotism and to prove themselves good citizens) exposed the recruits to different ways of life outside the South. After returning home, it was difficult for these veterans to live as before.

The Trip North

After making the decision, moving to the North sometimes became a dangerous task because local laws made it possible for migrants to be arrested. Once on the road, segregation practices caused additional problems. For example, Lillian Reuben-McNeary, a Black woman traveling by bus from Newberry, South Carolina, to New York City, accidently used a rest room reserved for White people. The other passengers feared for her life. Reuben-McNeary was reprimanded by the owner, but, to the relief of the others, the rebuke was verbal, not physical.

Traveling by train presented hazards of a different kind. African Americans had to ride in poorly maintained and overcrowded cars next to locomotives trailing soot and cinders that settled over the already anxious passengers.

After these indignities, what awaited the migrants once they reached the North was often unfamiliar. Yet adjustment was possible with the help of a friend or relative and assistance from the Urban League, church groups, the Traveler's Aid Society, or other local organizations that assisted new arrivals.

Faced with competition from migrants for jobs and the already short supply of housing, Whites at times responded violently to their new neighbors. Race riots initiated by Whites took place in several cities, including Chicago in 1919 and Detroit in 1925. To prevent Black residents from buying or renting in certain neighborhoods, restrictive legal covenants were instituted. These prohibited owners from selling or renting their homes to anyone their neighbors found objectionable.

The arrival of new migrants intensified the demand for housing and increased the size of Black neighborhoods. Housing in these neighborhoods was more expensive than comparable housing in other areas, even though homes were often dilapidated and lacked adequate sanitation facilities. Because the rents were high, many tenants shared their homes with

boarders or newly arrived relatives.

The Great Migration also caused some concern in the minds of African Americans already settled in northern cities. These residents feared that the increasing Black population would cause additional discrimination, and Black citizens were anxious about what they perceived as the unsophisticated manners of the newcomers.

The new residents soon made an impact on gritty urban politics. This larger Black community provided a new core of support for Black issues. The ballots cast by the migrants were important as swing votes and for the election of Black politicians.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, established before the Great Migration, found added support for its activities. In New York City, boycotts were aimed at companies that did not hire African Americans. Protests against the city's power company included paying bills with pennies and using candles in place of electric lights on "Black Tuesday." These actions constituted the seedbed for the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s.

Although they were the last hired and first fired, Black migrants found some solace in their salaries, which amounted to two and three times as much as wages paid southern Blacks. Setting a unique example, the Ford Motor Company's River Rouge plant in Michigan hired African Americans for assembly line work and other positions. But even at Ford, most Black employees worked in janitorial or unskilled foundry positions.

The new kinds of work they found were different from the jobs Blacks had known before. Although many migrants had worked in sawmills, steel companies, and fertilizer plants in the South on a seasonal basis, they still needed to adjust to the rigid rules and routines established by northern companies. Their routines as industrial laborers were far more regimented than their routines as agricultural workers, very different from the seasonal variations of the farm. Believing firmly that education would be the key to their economic advancement, migrants and their children took advantage of the schooling available in the North. Although the schools were frequently segregated and Black schools received less funding than White schools, almost twice as many Black students completed high school in the North than in the South, and many adults returned to school to complete their education.

As always, the church was a refuge. In the North, where religious services were more reserved, the migrants founded their own churches so that services could be more like those back home. They also drew heavily on the traditions of rural cooperation. And as the African American neighborhoods grew, they were able to support more Black-owned businesses. Funeral homes, beauty culture establishments, savings and loan associations, and newspapers flourished.

Was Life Better or Worse?

Was it worth the journey? Was life that much better in the North for African Americans? While migrants invigorated the northern African American community, moving North did not always remedy their individual difficulties. Migrating proved a mixed blessing for most African Americans. The North offered new opportunities, but not without new challenges. For a minority of migrants, the North never quite measured up, and they eventually returned to the South.

For many migrants, though, the chance to start anew outweighed any problems, and they embraced their new lives wholeheartedly. Others were at least satisfied enough to remain in the North and take advantage of the opportunities it offered.

The Great Migration initiated changes that continue to influence modern-day American society. The most important of these were the creation of large, predominantly Black enclaves in northern cities and a growing sense of confidence, economic opportunity, and political power in the African American community.

The Years That Followed

The Great Migration lost momentum in the late 1920s and early 1930s as the waves of migrants who once rushed North subsided. The Great Depression of the thirties swept away many of the advantages of relocating. United States involvement in World War II, however, renewed migration from the South. Nearly three million African Americans left that

region between 1940 and 1960, twice as many as during the Great Migration.

Many of the postwar migrants traveled to West Coast cities, though midwestern and eastern cities received their share. African American communities in Los Angeles, Seattle, and Portland more than tripled in size.

These migrants, like those who came before them, left the South with great expectations, some of which remained unfulfilled. The problems of substandard housing, unfair employment practices, and social inequity persisted, creating an underlying sense of frustration and anger. These frustrations fueled the Civil Rights activities and the urban rebellions of the fifties, sixties, and seventies. Building on the tactics of their predecessors, the new migrants joined with Black northern residents and used boycotts, marches, litigation, and the vote to force changes in American society. While the modern Civil Rights movement had a momentum of its own, the activism that characterizes the African American community and the configuration of present-day American cities was directly influenced by the generation of African Americans who moved North during the Great Migration.

(Johnnie Douthis was Public Affairs Officer in the Smithsonian Institution Office of Public Affairs until her retirement in 1991.)

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Credits

Field to Factory: Voices of the Great Migration was written and produced by David Tarnow for the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.

Narrated by Spencer Crew, Director, Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History.

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Photo Credits

Cover Photos: (left) African American cotton pickers picking cotton in the cotton field. Pulaski County, Arkansas, October, 1935. Photograph by Ben Shahn. Courtesy Library of Congress. (right) Two women welders, 1940's. Courtesy Library of Congress.

Page 4: Migratory agricultural workers on a highway in North Carolina, trying to "hitch" a ride North for the potato harvest. Photo by Jack Delano. Courtesy Library of Congress.

Page 6: Courtesy Ohio Historical Society.

Page 7: African American children and their teacher in the schoolroom on the Mileston Plantation in the Delta area of Mississippi, November, 1939. Photo by Marion Post Wolcott. Courtesy Library of Congress.

Page 12: Man grinding rough spots off freshly molded parts (Buckeye Steel Castings Company). Courtesy Ohio Historical Society.

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About Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings

Folkways Records was founded by Moses Asch and Marian Distler in 1947 to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In the ensuing decades, New York City-based Folkways became one of the largest independent record labels in the world, reaching a total of nearly 2,200 albums that were always kept in print.

The Smithsonian Institution acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987 to ensure that the sounds and genius of the artists would be preserved for future generations. All Folkways recordings are now available on high-quality audio cassettes, each packed in a special box along with the original LP liner notes.

Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings was formed to continue the Folkways tradition of releasing significant recordings with high-quality documentation. It produces new titles, reissues of historic recordings from Folkways and other record labels, and in collaboration with other companies also produces instructional videotapes, recordings to accompany published books, and a variety of other educational projects.

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