

## The Great Black Migration (1917)

*One of the most important social developments triggered by World War I was a massive migration of African Americans from the rural South to other regions of the country. Over a half million men, women, and children relocated between 1915 and 1920, and thousands more followed during the 1920s. They left in search of better paying jobs and the hope of greater social equality and political participation. Black newspapers such as the Chicago Defender actively encouraged the exodus. Most of the migrants settled in cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, forming African American neighborhoods that became fertile centers of black culture. The following letters from southern blacks requesting information about life in the North poignantly reveal the challenges for those wishing to migrate.*

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From Emmet J. Scott, ed., "Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916–1918," *Journal of Negro History* 4 (July 1, 1919): 290–340.

**P**alestine, Tex. 1/2/1917—Sir: I hereby enclose you a few lines to find out some things if you will be so kind to word them to me. I am a southerner lad and has never been in the north no further than Texas and I has heard much talk about the north and how much better the colard people are treated up there than down here and I has ben striving so hard in my coming up and now I see that I cannot get up there without the

ade of some one and I wants to ask you Dear Sir to please direct me in your best manner the step that I shall take to get there and if there are any way that you can help me to get there I am kindly asking for your ade. And if you will ade me please notify me by return mail because I am sure ancious to make it in the north because these southern white people ar so mean and they seems to be getting worse and I wants to get away and they wont pay me in get-

ting up there please give me information how I can get there I would like to get there in the early spring, if I can get there if possible. Our southern white people are so cruel we collard people are almost afraid to walke the streets after night. So please let me hear from you by return mail. I will not say very much in this letter I will tell you more about it when I hear from you please ans. soon.

Newbern, Ala. 4/17/1917—Sir: . . . Doubtless you have learned of the great exodus of our people to the north and west from this and other states. I wish to say that we are forced to go when one thinks of a grown man wages is only fifty to seventy cents per day for all grades of work. He is compelled to go where there is better wages and sociable conditions, believe me. When I say that [at] many places here in this state the only thing that the black man gets is a peck of meal and from three to four lbs. of bacon per week, and he is treated as a slave. As leaders we are powerless for we dare not resent such or to show even the slightest disapproval. Only a few days ago more than 1,000 people left here for the North and West. They cannot stay here. The white man is saying that you must not go, but they are not doing anything by way of assisting the black man to stay. As a minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church I am on the verge of starvation simply because of the above conditions. I shall be glad to know if there is any possible way by which I could be of real service to you as director of your society. Thanking you in advance for an early reply, and for any suggestions that you might be able to offer.

Dapne, Ala., 4/20/17—Sir: I am writing you to let you know that there is 15 or 20 familys wants to come up there at once but cant come on account of money to come with and we cant phone you here we will be killed they dont want us to leave here & say if we dont go to war and fight for our country they are going to kill us and wants to get

away if we can if you send 20 passes there is no doubt that every one of us will com at once. we are not doing any thing here we cant get a living out of what we do now some of these people are farmers and som are cooks barbers and black smiths but the greater part are farmers & good worker & honest people & up to date the trash pile dont want to go no where These are nice people and respectable find a place like that & send passes & we all will come at once we all wants to leave here out of this hard luck place if you cant use us find some place that does need this kind of people we are called Negroes here. I am a reader of the Defender and am delighted to know how times are there & was to glad to, know if we could get some one to pass us away from here to a better land. We work but cant get scarcely any thing for it & they dont want us to go away & there is not much of anything here to do & nothing for it Please find some one that need this kind of a people & send at once for us. We dont want anything but our wareing and bed clothes & have not got no money to get away from here with & beging to get away before we are killed and hope to here from you at once. We cant talk to you over the phone here we are afraid to they dont want to hear one say that he or she wants to leave here if we do we are apt to be killed. They say if we dont go to war they are not going to let us stay here with their folks and it is not any thing that we have done to them.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. According to these accounts, what role did racial discrimination play in provoking southern blacks to migrate to the North?
2. Describe some of the economic hardships faced by blacks in the South.
3. Why might southern elites have wanted blacks to remain in the South?