

## Escaping Jim Crow

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**Nicodemus, KS**

Two pioneers of the famous town settled by African Americans in 1870s.

On a day-to-day level, many southern blacks resisted Jim Crow by hoping for the day when they could escape the Jim Crow South--much as their ancestors had used the Underground Railroad to escape slavery by going to the North. Thousands of blacks had indeed left for Kansas and Oklahoma in the 1880s and the 1890s. The movement to Kansas became known as the "**Kansas Exodus**," and even today there exist several nearly all-black towns in the state. Thousands of other black sharecroppers moved to southern towns and cities in the 1880s and 1890s. Some African Americans even tried to establish all-black towns within the South, like Mound Bayou in the Mississippi delta, in hopes of completely isolating themselves from whites altogether while staying in the region of their births. But the vast majority of black migrants from the South traveled to eastern and mid-western cities and towns, beginning in the 1890s. In a three-year span from 1916 to 1919, in what has been called the "Great Migration," over half a million blacks fled the South. Another million left in the 1920s. During the Great Depression, when black sharecroppers were turned off the land, thousands of them joined relatives and friends in Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, New York, and Los Angeles.

Many of these black migrants were pushed out of the South by a series of natural disasters, such as floods and the boll weevil scourge which devastated cotton crops from Texas to Georgia. Other were pulled to the North by the opportunity for jobs created by the labor shortage during World War One and the cut-off of European immigration to the U. S. in the 1920s. But it was also the years of pent up anger and smoldering rage that propelled southern blacks to leave the land of Jim Crow laws and lynchings at their first opportunity. Although escaping to northern and midwestern cities did bring an end to the most overt forms of Jim Crow for southern blacks, the North was not a "promised land," one completely free of racial strife. Many white city dwellers bitterly resented the influx of blacks, and violent race riots erupted all over the nation from 1890 to 1945. Major ones occurred in East St. Louis, Houston, Chicago, and Tulsa in the years 1917 through 1921. In nearly every case black people defended themselves and their families against roving mobs of white racists.

In the cities of the North, the NAACP and the National Urban League, both interracial groups, worked to integrate blacks into the economic mainstream of American life. A third organization, the largest mass movement among blacks prior to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League, was less concerned with integration than with economic development. An admirer of Booker T. Washington, the UNIA founder, **Marcus Garvey**, advocated self-help and black autonomy over integration. He also launched a movement to send blacks to Africa that attracted the interest of thousands of African Americans, including many who had moved to Oklahoma and Kansas in the 1880s and 1890s.

Much of the desire to flee the South and to resist segregation legally and politically had resulted from the experience of African-American soldiers in World War I. Young black soldiers home from Europe found Jim Crow especially grueling, and many of them joined their neighbors and relatives who had moved to northern cities during and before the war, enticed by jobs in the war industries. A similar pattern occurred after World War II, when over a million and a half African Americans left the South for eastern and midwestern cities and the west coast.

Most importantly, black Americans in the 1940s refused to accept a segregated military or lack of access by blacks to employment in the war industries. The African-American leader **A. Philip**

**Randolph** threatened in 1941 to lead 50,000 blacks in a non-violent "March on Washington D.C." to secure fair employment in the war industries. President Franklin Roosevelt responded by opening the defense industries to equal employment, monitored by the Fair Employment Practices Agency. Northern blacks were attracted to the Democratic Party in the 1930s and 1940s because of FDR's support for labor, the various welfare benefit programs that aided impoverished blacks, and Eleanor Roosevelt's advocacy for civil rights. This switch in political parties represented a monumental shift from the party of Lincoln to the party of FDR, and it laid the political ground for challenging Jim Crow in the 1950s.