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Moving North, Heading West

In the 50 years following the end of Reconstruction, African Americans transformed American life once more: They moved. Driven in part by economic concerns, and in part by frustration with the straitened social conditions of the South, in the 1870s African Americans began moving North and West in great numbers. In the 1890s, the number of African Americans moving to the Northeast and the Midwest was double that of the previous decade. In 1910, it doubled again, then again in 1920. In the 1920s, more than 750,000 African Americans left the South--a greater movement of people than had occurred in the Irish potato famine of the 1840s.

The large-scale relocation to the Northeast and West brought many other changes with it, as many largely rural people moved into cities for the first time. Housing was difficult to come by, and in many cities the non-African American residents demanded strict segregation, relegating the new arrivals to self-contained neighborhoods in undesirable parts of town. In addition, most of the available work in the cities was industrial, and many migrating African Americans faced the prospect of learning new trades, generally at lower rates of pay than European Americans received. Tensions between longtime residents and new migrants frequently flared, and during the first decades of the century race riots struck many of the nation's cities and towns, from Springfield, Illinois, and Rosewood, Florida, to New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, and Tulsa.



Colored troops disembarking

The coming of the First World War drew still more African Americans to the nation's cities, both in the North and the South, as workers were attracted by new factory jobs. A university education came within reach for more and more African Americans, and considerable debate emerged about the role of the growing African American professional class. As African American officers such as Colonel Charles Young attained higher command rank, a career in the military became more appealing.

The new century also saw the birth of a new generation of activist organizations dedicated to advancing the cause of equal rights for African Americans, as well as to improving their social and economic conditions. The two most notable of these were the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which was founded in 1910, and the National Urban League, which followed the next year. Both groups were racially integrated, and both were seen by some as too radical in their goals and methods, but they soon emerged as central forces in the struggles of the mid-century.

Perhaps the most profound result of the move to the Northeast and West, however, was the shift in electoral power that it brought with it. For the first time since Reconstruction, a substantial number of African Americans were able to freely exercise their right to vote. This access to the tools of democracy soon resulted in the election of African American political leaders, and it also made the African American electorate a force to be reckoned with on the national political scene-a force whose concerns could not easily be ignored.

To learn more about the Great Migration in one city, visit *Chicago: Destination for the Great Migration*, a section of *The African-American Mosaic*.