

Black Protest and the Great Migration

A Brief History with Documents

Eric Arnesen



undoubtedly have some effect. When the war ends it is doubtful if the labor shortage in Europe will allow a very large migration to the United States for a generation or more. This will mean increased demand for colored laborers in the North. A writer in the *New York Evening Globe* predicts that 1917 will see 400,000 of the better class of Negro workers come to the North.

At any rate, we face here a social change among American Negroes of great moment, and one which needs to be watched with intelligent interest.

MARY DeBARDELEBEN

The Negro Exodus: A Southern Woman's View

March 18, 1917

The Southwestern Christian Advocate was one of dozens of African American newspapers published in the early twentieth century. Although some were affiliated with particular religious denominations, most were secular. Sharing no single viewpoint, black weeklies provided extensive coverage of local, regional, and national news about African Americans, their position in the United States, and the state of race relations. The Southwestern Christian Advocate was published in New Orleans and was sponsored by the Methodist Episcopal Church. In this article, one of the South's rare white racial liberals expressed sympathy toward the migrants, calling on churches to address their plight.

The papers have been full of late of the tragedy of the German expulsion or deportation of the Belgian [*sic*] laborers. Our hearts have been stirred, our indignation aroused as we read of fathers, sons, husbands and brothers torn from their children, their wives and sweet-hearts, from the old loved surroundings, and borne forcibly to labor in regions strange and new under conditions galling and humiliating.

But there is another deportation, another expulsion going on under our very eyes that concerns us more nearly—some of the causes for

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which should make us, as citizens of a great, free nation, hang our heads in shame, should send us, as professing Christians, to our knees, crying aloud for forgiveness for our cruel neglect.

Thousands Take Flight

I speak of the great exodus of the Negroes from our Southland. There is much being said about it in the press these days. O, yes, we are beginning to talk and question now, for we are beginning to fear for our pocketbooks. That which a regard for common justice, fair play, human rights could not accomplish, a fear for our bank account is doing, and we are asking: Why is the Negro dissatisfied? What can we do to keep him in the South? We can't afford to let him go; he means too much to us—financially. He works for little: his upkeep costs us little, for we can house him in any kind of shack, and make him pay us well for that; we do not have to be careful of his living conditions; he is good-natured, long-suffering, and if he should happen to give us trouble we can cope with that and the law will uphold us in anything we do. Am I exaggerating? If we do not thus reason audibly, this is at least the attitude we, as a white race and employers of labor, assume or allow assumed.

But the Negro is going, going in scores, in hundreds and in thousands. In some sections of South Georgia there are stretches of country almost destitute of Negro population. Country churches which once had congregations of two and three hundred have now only twenty or thirty members. One Negro Conference of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church that had a membership in 1915 of 11,000 has now barely 5,000. At a recent session of this Conference men who had been pastors of these people stood on the floor of the Conference and with tears in their eyes and sobs in their throats pleaded to be allowed to go with their congregations. "Not that we want to go for our own sakes," they said, "but for the sake of our people. We know it means suffering and hard living, but we will work with our hands for our support, that we may minister to our people, may keep them together, that they may not drift and be swallowed up in the great cities of the North, with no spiritual or moral guidance to keep them from the downward path."

They are going at night, these refugees; the trains are full of them, and they are going with a mighty fear upon them. A friend of mine was talking to an old man who, with his wife, sons and daughters, was leaving the old home to go out into a great strange world, their poor

belongings in clumsy, homely-looking bundles in the seats beside them. The stock was left, they could not sell it, they said: and much of their household stuff, the poor collection of years of labor—but theirs.

Why They Go

"But why do you go?" my friend asked. The old man, with trembling fingers, drew from his pocket a crumpled paper and spread it out before them. At the top of the sheet was crudely drawn a skull and cross-bones; below was written: "You are hereby warned that you and your entire family must be gone from this community within forty-eight hours. Your attention is called to the symbol at top of notice." In the community near which the man lived a woman had been burned at the stake a few months before. Her crime was due to the natural impulse of motherhood. She had dared to protect her child from blows administered by a white man. And so the old man, fearing for his life, was fleeing in the dead of night.

In another town in Georgia four innocent Negroes were foully murdered in the usual way—by an insane mob. The father of the family was lodged in jail for assault on an officer who came to arrest him. The mob therefore seized the family—the mother, two daughters, one of whom was soon to become a mother, and a ten-year-old boy. I cannot go into the revolting circumstances of it all. Suffice it to say that little white boys saw it and hence seeds of brutality, hatred and revenge were planted in their young hearts. Many Negroes are leaving that section. Just what proportion are leaving because of unfair treatment I am unprepared to say, but such outrageous violation of law is certainly playing its part in the exodus.

A Negro woman in Georgia resisted the offensive attention of a white ruffian, with the result that her house, with all her possessions, was burned, and notice served on her to leave the community at once or she would pay the penalty at the rope's end.

It is not simply the poor, irresponsible, thriftless Negro that undergoes such treatment at the hands of a senseless mob, for example, the recent occurrence in South Carolina, where a Negro worth anywhere from \$20,000 to \$50,000, a law-abiding citizen, was cruelly put to death and his family ordered to leave. His son owned a drug store, where he was doing a good business, all of which had to be sacrificed.

Of course, these outrages are perpetrated by the coarse, brutal mob element. But what are the civil authorities doing about it? With

the exception, possibly, of the case cited from South Carolina, where Governor Manning is demanding an investigation, we know of nothing being done to restrain the mob spirit which seems to be rampant. Do we criticise the Germans for barbarities in Belgium and allow with perfect impunity these outrages in our midst? God forgive us for our shamelessness, our self-righteousness, our hypocrisy!

And what is the Church doing about it? Do we know anywhere of any church taking an out-and-out stand against such? We seem to be bound hand and foot. What is it we are afraid of? To bring it closer home; What is our great Methodist Episcopal Church, South, doing about it? Where is her influence? Where is her voice? Who has gagged her? Is she a slave of prejudice? Is she a coward? Or is she asleep? We prefer to believe it is the last, but it is time for her to wake up or a great opportunity will have passed and God will find another instrument through which to voice the wrongs of an oppressed people.

Not only does she seem to be taking no measures to change existing conditions, not only is her pulpit silent with regard to these atrocious wrongs, but she, this great Methodist Episcopal Church, South, wealthy, strong, influential, is actually failing to meet the responsibility of a task already assumed. Paine College is the one avenue through which, as a Church, she has even pretended to minister to the Negro race, by training its leaders, its teachers, its preachers, its parents of the generations to come. So small has been the response to calls for actual sustenance for the school, so meager has been her interest in this, her one institution for the benefit of the Negro race, that, unless there is an immediate and beneficent response, Paine College must close its doors and a great Church acknowledge shamefacedly her failure to measure up to a magnificent, God-given opportunity.

O, Church of the Christ who ministered to the neglected, the outcast and the alien, do you not hear His call today to follow in the footsteps of your Master and minister abundantly to this child race, this oppressed people in our midst? Can you face Him with the blood of this people upon your soul? Will you not "Loose the bonds of wickedness, undo the bonds of the yoke and let the oppressed go free"? Will you not "Deal thy bread to the hungry and bring the poor that are cast out to thy house" of protection, and warmth, and safety? "Then shall thy light," O Church of Christ, "break forth as the morning and thy healing spring forth speedily."

Paine College, Augusta, Ga.

Two hours before the train left the two agents of the Pennsylvania who had been arrested Saturday and released on bond were rearrested, charged again with having violated the state law of acting as immigrant agents.

Bail of \$1,000 was immediately furnished for each of the men, and they were at the station to assist in the work of getting the laborers aboard the train.

NEW ORLEANS TIMES-PICAYUNE

Luring Labor North

August 22, 1916

Vigorous protests are going up from Georgia and Florida, especially from Savannah and Jacksonville, against the work of the labor agents from the North, who are luring negro labor from the South Atlantic states to the great injury of employers in that section. There have been complaints on this score for some time, but the drain has, of late, become so great as to call for action. A steady drift of negroes has started Northward, attracted by reports of the big wages paid there. Just now—and, like everything else, due to the European war—the movement has reached immense proportions. The war has cut down immigration to the minimum and, as a matter of fact, as many people are leaving the country each year as are entering it. It is from the great mass of unskilled labor from Southern and Eastern Europe, that Northern employers, mine owners and others, have obtained the greater part of their labor. With this immigration shut off and the demand for unskilled labor as great as it is now, and growing greater,

Northern employers have turned to the South to supply the deficiency with the negroes; and they have, by their efforts and inducements, persuaded thousands of the latter to move North.

The result is naturally demoralizing labor circles, and many planters and manufacturers will not have enough men to supply their needs or take off their crops. Similar movements have been started at various times, and have always been harmful. The negroes are brought North almost wholly for temporary work, and when no longer needed are fired and told to find their way back home as best they can. So great has the abuse become that a number of states have passed laws on the subject of these agents, requiring them to furnish bonds for the return of the workmen they have thus lured away. Occasionally, there has been forcible interference with the agents, on the ground that they deceived the negroes and tricked and misled them. . . . Experience with numerous similar exodus movements warns us that something should be done in time to check or prevent the injustice and injury that will otherwise inevitably result from the operations of wholly irresponsible labor agents who give no thought to the men they are bringing North after they have delivered them to the mines or other work they are intended for, at so much per head.

Fortunately for this section this demand for cheap unskilled labor has so far been mainly in the East with the result that the Gulf states have suffered little loss of negro labor. It is well for employers here, however, to be warned in time and to be watchful. With the great demand for rough labor in this country, and the disappearance of the source from which it has previously been largely obtained, immigration, we may expect to see similar raids on negro workers in all parts of the South. It will be well, therefore, to throw such safeguards and protection around both employer and laborer as are necessary to make sure that no harm or demoralization results from the excessive and unusually unscrupulous activities of labor agents from the North.

SOUTHERN BLACKS' WARNINGS ABOUT MIGRATION

J. A. MARTIN

Negroes Urged to Remain in South

November 25, 1916

Southern African Americans were not unanimous on the desirability of continued migration. Some black writers used the press, black and white, to remind their readers that the South remained African Americans' "natural home," that racial oppression knew no geographical boundaries, and that the North was no "promised land." The Savannah Morning News was a daily white newspaper that, like the New Orleans Times-Picayune, opposed the migration. Its publication of this article on the conference of the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) church, a black religious group, likely served to reassure white readers and caution black readers that the migration was a mistake.

C.M.E. Conference Report as Much Race Prejudice in North as South

WADLEY, GA., Nov. 24.—The C.M.E. conference had a very lively session today. The committees on education and the state of the country reported and were listened to with great interest.

The conference is much interested in the colored people leaving the state and going North. . . . The committee on the state of the country said, among other things:

"As much as we appreciate the fact of spreading the borders of our church in the northern section of this country, we look upon the exodus of our people from the South with a deal of misgivings when we realize the industrial opportunities on the one hand in the South and the high cost of living and scarcity of the soil and the high prices of real estate in the North as compared with the abundance of cheap tillable soil in the South.

"On the other hand, we have long since learned that the racial prejudices and problems are not local, sectional or even national, but are world-wide, and as such they must be handled with that sanity that is

Savannah Morning News, 25 Nov. 1916.

filled with patience and wisdom. They cannot be solved with that feverish sentiment that has so often hurt rather than helped in the solution.

"We further feel that the problem is many sided. It takes on its complications in proportion to the numbers of each race as located in the different sections or communities, or is aggravated by economic conditions. In many cases, they are incidentally race questions and would become problems if the issues were at stake between different cultured groups of white races or of black races. For instance, the European war would not be more horrible if waged between white and black races. For these reasons as a church we feel called upon to offer such statement that may add something worthy as advice to our people in these days of restlessness among them as evidenced by their moving from the South to the North to make better their conditions. This claim founded upon the ground of better wages, first and second for better treatment, both under the law and general sentiment.

"As to prejudice, we find it the same in the North as in the South. Thus the manly and Christian thing to do is to settle the problem upon the soil where it originated. We believe that the Christianity of the South is sufficient for this if exercised by the good white and black people of this section. Believing this to be true, we urge with all of our might that the white and black ministers do all in their power to put down lynching by preaching special sermons and lecturing upon it and other vital questions which are undermining our civilization in the South. If this is done we feel called upon to urge our people to stay in the South and till the fruitful soil. The white people have a great opportunity to encourage our people to stay by carrying out the policy of good treatment."

PERCY H. STONE

Negro Migration

August 1, 1917

Writing in the pages of the Outlook, a national white weekly magazine, Percy H. Stone, a young black man and a member of the senior class of Hampton Institute, a conservative vocational and teacher training school for African Americans in Virginia, regarded black migration as a mistake.

Outlook, 116, no. 14 (1 Aug. 1917): 520-21.

... At the outbreak of the present world war the call of country, fatherland, and munition factory stripped the Northern and Central Western industries of their labor units; at the same time came an increased demand for manufactured products. This disastrous condition caused the manufacturer of the North and West to turn, as a last resort, to the only available labor in America.

Since that time general calls for help have been circulated over various sections of the South at different times, and we—some of us—smarting under the pinch of difficult living, crop failure, harsh treatment, and, in some cases, indebtedness, have already responded to the number of five hundred thousand.

In answering this call of an apparently better opportunity we are running a tremendous risk, because it is impossible for us to adapt ourselves to a new climate, new conditions, and new people without a great deal of suffering. The people of the North and West have always been friendly and willing to help us so long as we remained in the South, but now that we are distributing ourselves among them it may lead to a more prejudiced attitude towards us.

Taking advantage of this general movement among us, some would have it, and not without some foundation, that it was primarily to escape race discrimination and mistreatment. True, we resent most bitterly some treatment accorded us, but we have lived in the South since our advent into America. We understand the soil, the climate, and the life in the South; and, being by nature a race of peaceful people, we prefer to remain in the South and solve our problems by industry, thrift, and education.

Yet our plans for economic independence have been thwarted in these abnormal times, and the higher wages, the novelty of new surroundings, and other things are attracting some of us away from the Southland.

Various theories have been advanced as to what will happen at the end of the European war. Some say that the influx of foreigners impoverished by the ravages of war will displace and leave us stranded—a people disappointed and ungrateful in the eyes of the Southern people. But no one can truthfully predict the final outcome. Although a million of my people may cross the Mason and Dixon line in search of an economic outlet, the South will still hold the things most necessary to our racial progress—the opportunity of owning our homes and the chance to develop our best characteristics.

Doubtless some of us who are now leaving the South will return when conditions again become settled, but not all of us will; we know that in this movement some, at least, are making a great mistake and