



**DC Women at Work & School, 1899**

## **Moving North**

*The success of the cotton gin in the early 19th century ignited a demand for slaves in the South*

### **The Great Migration**

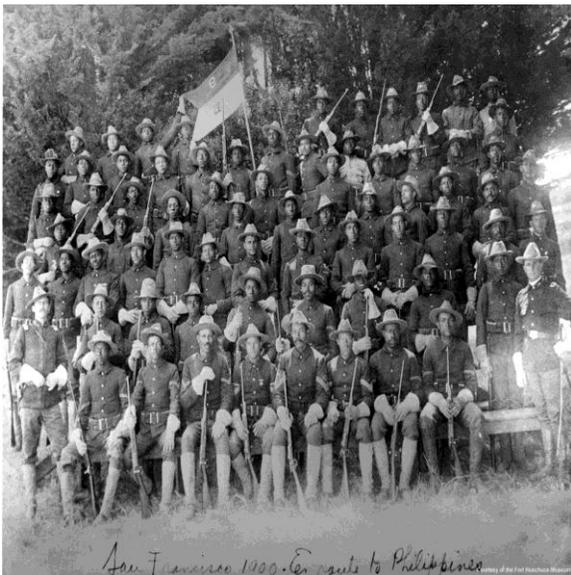
Between 1914 and 1920, roughly 500,000 Black southerners packed their bags and headed to the North, fundamentally transforming the social, cultural, and political landscape of cities such as Chicago, New York, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Detroit. The Great Migration would reshape Black America and the nation as a whole.

Black southerners faced a host of social, economic, and political challenges that prompted their migration to the North.

The majority of Black farmers labored as sharecroppers, remained in perpetual debt, and lived in dire poverty. Their condition worsened in 1915–16 as a result of a boll weevil infestation that ruined cotton crops throughout the South.

These economic obstacles were made worse by social and political oppression. By the time of the war, most Black people had been disfranchised, effectively stripped of their right to vote through both legal and extralegal means. Jim Crow segregation, legitimized by the Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) Supreme Court ruling, forced Black people to use separate and usually inferior facilities.

The southern justice system systematically denied them equal protection under the law and condoned the practice of vigilante mob violence. As an aspiring migrant from Alabama wrote in a letter to the Chicago Defender, "[I] am in the darkness of the south and [I] am trying my best to get out."



Wartime opportunities in the urban North gave hope to such individuals. The American industrial economy grew significantly during the war. However, the conflict also cut off European immigration and reduced the pool of available cheap labor.

Unable to meet demand with existing European immigrants and white women alone, northern businesses increasingly looked to Black southerners to fill the void.

In turn, the prospect of higher wages and improved working conditions prompted thousands of Black southerners to abandon their agricultural lives and start anew in major industrial centers.

Black women remained by and large confined to domestic work, while men for the first time in significant numbers made entryways into the northern manufacturing, packinghouse, and automobile industries.

Anxious white southerners claimed that northern labor agents lulled unsuspecting Black southerners to the North and into a life of urban misery. But, to the contrary, the Great Migration was a social movement propelled by Black people and their desires for a better life. The Chicago Defender, which circulated throughout the South, implored Black people to break free from their oppression and to take advantage of opportunities in the North.

Even more influential were the testimonials and letters of the migrants themselves. Migrants relied on informal networks of family and friends to facilitate their move to the North. Individuals would often leave to scout out conditions, secure a job, and find living arrangements, then send for the rest of their family.

Word of mouth provided aspiring migrants with crucial information about where to relocate, how to get there, and how best to earn a living. This sense of community eased a Black migrant's transition to city life.

Southern migrants did not always find the "promised land" they envisioned. They frequently endured residential segregation, substandard living conditions, job discrimination, and in many cases, the hostilities of white residents. Older Black residents sometimes resented the presence of the new migrants, as neighborhoods became increasingly overcrowded and stigmatized as ghettos. But life in the North was nevertheless exciting and liberating.

No longer subjected to the indignities of Jim Crow and the constant threat of racial violence, southern migrants experienced a new sense of freedom. Southern culture infused northern Black communities with a vibrancy that inspired new forms of music, literature, and art. The Great Migration marked a significant moment in the economic, political, social, and cultural growth of modern Black America.

## Mt. Zion United Methodist Church

Mt. Zion was founded in 1816 by black members of the Montgomery Street Church in the Georgetown Section of Washington, D.C. (now the Dumbarton Avenue United Methodist Church) who, though they usually comprised half of the congregation, were fed up with being segregated from white worshippers.

Autonomy was not all theirs, however — members of the newly formed Mt. Zion still held services under the auspice of Montgomery and, as it turned out, were presided over by white pastors.

But it began a rich cultural and religious identity for blacks in Georgetown, who made up nearly a third of the population, the majority of them free men. It became one of the few places under law where blacks could congregate in large numbers, and it was, at the height of the abolition movement, a major stop on the Underground Railroad.

Whispers would travel electrically through the congregation: who was being hidden in the churchyard, who was up for sale, which families were close to being rent apart. The success of the cotton gin in the early 19th century ignited a demand for slaves in the South, and so with it a widespread sundering of families as mothers and sons and sisters were sold downriver.



Around 600,000 slaves were fated to endure this “Second Middle Passage” to New Orleans or other Southern cities. As Bowman explained, church “classes” really became organized sects for keeping abreast of the latest news on local slaves and, when possible, spirited those away who were being bought up for market.

Mt. Zion, then, is immutably wrapped in the history of slave resistance in Washington. One of the Pearl escapees, Alfred Pope, was a member of the church and later bought a plot of land in Georgetown on which to build a permanent house of worship.

After the war, after Emancipation, it burned to the ground in 1880, but was rebuilt four years later.

Walking through it now, you can almost taste the history, the stories it has witnessed. You almost hear small noises, something like ghosts or singing voices long past. CAG President Jennifer Altemus called it the “perfect venue” to discuss Ricks’ story.

“[This church] puts you in a place, gives you a feel for the history,” Bowman said. At 87, he has seen a good portion of it.

Ricks is much younger, a scholar at heart, with a soft and wavering voice that teems with emotion. Her book centers around Mary and Emily Edmonson, daughters of a free black man from Georgetown. Because their mother was a slave, however, they inherited their bonded status, along with 12 other siblings.

The year was 1848. At that time, slavery was hardly taboo in Washington. Having been comprised of land ceded by slave states, the city was firmly rooted below the Mason-Dixon line, and slavery, as Ricks put it, “literally came with the territory.”

Dolley Madison owned a slave late into her life, which she sold to Senator Daniel Webster the year before the Pearl made its dash for the North. That slave, Paul Jennings, was one of three men who conspired to charter a ship that would whisk away the slaves of Washington. The other was Samuel Edmonson, the older brother of Mary and Emily.

## **The Pearl Plan**

The plan was simple: gather up the slaves marked for sale, steal away in the night to the ship and sail up the Chesapeake to safety. For a few, it was the only option. “Many of the people boarded the Pearl that night because their security ... was threatened by the slave trade,” Ricks said.

She went on to tell how, on a foggy August evening, the Edmonsons and the rest boarded the Pearl, moored close to the future site of the Washington Monument, and sailed away. They made for Point Lookout, the mouth of the Potomac, but when they arrived they found the weather had made it impassable.

The captain, a white Pennsylvanian, had no choice but to anchor the boat in a leeward cove. Slaveowners in Washington had already awakened, discovered the plot and were in hot pursuit. Anti-abolitionist riots had already begun surging across the city.

The Pearl was eventually discovered right where it was anchored, its passengers manacled and dragged back to Washington. Most were sold and sent to New Orleans as punishment. One of the luckier Pearl escapees was Alfred Pope, whose owner took him back and freed him in his will two years later. He was serving on Mt. Zion’s board of trustees when he appointed the 29th Street space nearly 30 years later, a free man.

Mary and Emily Edmonson became one of the first causes for a young Henry Ward Beecher, the flamboyant abolitionist preacher who later would ship rifles (“Beecher’s Bibles”) off to Bleeding Kansas. With his sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, they secured the Edmonson sisters’ freedom and their admission to Oberlin College.

It was a story the audience had trouble digesting. A silence, eeriness hung in the air a moment, the realization that those on the front line of this country’s greatest conflict, the figures in old daguerreotypes, the names in textbooks, had once been a part of or helped this congregation, now housed in the very church where they sat. It was black history, American history, animated and made real.

In 1880, most of the African American adults in this Georgetown, Washington, D.C. neighborhood were born in Virginia or Maryland, and had probably been slaves there; to judge from the birthdates of children born in the District of Columbia; these families came into being after the Civil War.

Aside from those men involved in the butcher trade—the main business of the neighborhood—almost every black man was a common laborer—doing outdoor work that required no training—and every grown woman in service or a laundress, picking up loads of wash and taking them home.