



BOUND
FOR THE
PROMISED
LAND

AFRICAN
AMERICAN
RELIGION AND
THE GREAT
MIGRATION



Milton C. Sernett

BOUND
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THE
C. ERIC LINCOLN
SERIES ON THE
BLACK
EXPERIENCE

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*African American Religion and
the Great Migration*



Milton C. Sernett

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TO JAN

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This book has been in the works for about a decade, far longer than I wished or anticipated. I am indebted to the authors represented in the bibliography, for all scholarship is collective enterprise. Yet some individuals deserve special mention. Pioneering members of the African American Religious History Group of the American Academy of Religion urged me on with counsel that the project was worth doing. Randall Burkett was especially helpful when I was a research fellow at the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute, Harvard University, in 1987–88, and he gave generously from his impressive treasury of knowledge about sources. David Wills of Amherst College read an early incarnation of the text and provided a number of helpful suggestions. Participants in the Northeast Seminar on Black Religion listened to several chapters in essay form and found enough merit in them to prime the pump. I made several trips to Chicago in the course of research, and each time I returned a bit more energized because of conversations with James Grossman, then of the University of Chicago and now of the Newberry Institute, and others who knew the territory better than I did.

Two geographers at Syracuse University allowed me to sit in on their graduate seminars when I joined the faculty more than two decades ago. A historian by trade with earlier service in a Lutheran seminary teach-

ing American church history, I was eager to expand my horizons. David Sopher, now deceased, taught me something about the geography of religion, and Donald Meinig excelled at the craft of historical geography. I did not stay long enough to earn the geographer's mantle, but Meinig's and Sopher's spatial perspectives raised questions in my mind about how a segment of the story of African American religion might be told with attention to place and region. That *Bound for the Promised Land* did not turn out to be an exercise in the historical geography of African American religion as I had once thought of it as being does not mean that time spent in the geographers' domain at Huntington-Beard-Crouse was lost on me.

Students at Syracuse University and at the Kennedy Institute, Free University, Berlin, patiently heard portions of what is to follow. The Fulbright year in Berlin came at a time when the manuscript was under review at Duke University Press. It was encouraging to receive positive feedback from German students while I awaited final word regarding the potential book's fate. The students' interest in the subject matter was in part a reflection of a too rich diet in American Studies on African American literature. Except through novels such as James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, few of them had any exposure to African American religion in its historical context. Syracuse University students also deserve credit for keeping me on my toes after teaching African American religious history for more than two decades.

I am pleased that *Bound for the Promised Land* found a home at Duke University Press. The Press published my anthology of primary sources, *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, in 1985 and has continued to keep it in print for wide use in university and seminary classrooms. Now that the "migration book" has been completed, I hope to find time to work on a revised edition of the document anthology that Reynolds Smith, my editor at Duke Press, has asked for.

This book is dedicated to Jan, my wife of more than three decades.

Milton C. Sernett
Cazenovia, New York
February 1997

INTRODUCTION



Migration is a theme of enduring historic significance. The wellspring of the myth of the American national character has been the movement of peoples of European descent across the landscape. Historians in the tradition of Frederick Jackson Turner have explained the United States in terms of the challenge of the western frontier.¹ The historiography of European settlement and migration has so dominated the literature that the internal movement of peoples of African descent is often overlooked. Looking from the perspective of the end of the twentieth century, the movement out of the South of significant numbers of African Americans beginning during World War I is far more important to understanding the peril and promise of contemporary American society than the experiences of, for example, immigrants from Norway making their way to rural North Dakota or of farmers from New England following the Oregon Trail. The Great Migration acted as demographic watershed, the harbinger of economic, political, and social changes that have transformed the United States.

Of about half of black Americans living in 1970 outside what he termed their "old country," historian Bernard A. Weisberger wrote, "for complex reasons, the children of the 'immigrant within,' the northward-moving black still remained unmelted." In contrast, newcomers from outside the

United States, regulated by a series of immigration restriction acts beginning in 1917 and culminating in 1924, were “largely absorbed into the major currents of American life.”² The persistent barriers of race, and to a lesser degree class, that the refugees from the South encountered in the urban North have their base in the era of the Great Migration. From today’s perspective, the story of the internal migration of African Americans is of greater significance for understanding our contemporary culture than invoking the shibboleth of an ethnic “melting pot.”

My interest in the voluntary movement of African Americans began in earnest when I visited the National Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institution one Sunday afternoon in the early spring of 1987. The sun shone brightly over Washington, D.C., and expectations were that the cherry blossoms would be unusually abundant. Like other visitors, I was there to tour the exhibit “Field to Factory: Afro-American Migration, 1915–1940,” which had opened February 5, 1987, and was already attracting widespread attention.³ Using visual, aural, and physical artifacts, “Field to Factory” told the story of hundreds of thousands of African Americans who sought to start their lives over in the urban North after new economic opportunities opened during World War I.

I lingered for a long time at many portions of the 7,000 square foot exhibit, looking and listening. Drawn to the objects that Spencer Crew, chief curator, and his associates had brought together to depict the social history of ordinary people, I became a silent witness to the power of the material to evoke the spiritual. Sunday services were over, and African American churchgoers, dressed in their best, were arriving to spend an afternoon at the Smithsonian. I overheard several “elders” among the families recount how familiar many of the artifacts were. It was as if a time machine had transported them to the rural South, which either they or their parents once called home. I distinctly recall the comment of a woman who examined the exhibit depicting the interior of a rural church: “We had one like that in Georgia.” The cohort of African Americans who participated in the Great Migration of the World War I era shrinks with each passing year. Perhaps that is why the “Field to Factory” exhibit generated such interest, had its stay at the Smithsonian extended, and toured the country through the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. It drew African Americans living in Alaska together in retrospective comradery, and it stimulated others to dig deeper in archives and call up family memories of the pilgrimage from South to North.⁴

Few visitors that Sunday afternoon could have been old enough to have participated in the Great Migration of 1916 to 1918, the core experience with which this book deals. The Smithsonian exhibit used the wartime exodus to represent the entire period from 1915 to 1940 when African Americans left the South in waves of varying intensity. One could argue for a Great Migration of 1916 until 1930, since the onset of the Great Depression significantly slowed the black exodus. For metaphorical as well as historical reasons that I hope will become clear, I use the term "Great" primarily in connection with the movement during World War I, but it includes the postwar phases of the 1920s. My chronological boundaries extend into the 1930s and 1940s only for the purpose of examining the impact of the exchange of place epitomized by the Great Migration. I do so in part to make the case that the whole story of the significance of the Great Migration is not in numbers. Its magnitude (including the post-World War I phases) is worthy of note, but many more African Americans remained in the South than left it. By 1930 the majority were still tied to the land. Nevertheless, a new consciousness emerged by the end of the Great Migration era. The city became the critical arena in which the struggle of African Americans to find the "Promised Land" took place.

As we shall see, participants in the Great Migration interpreted their escape from the South as the "Second Emancipation." This term suggests that they had more than material ends in mind when voting with their feet to leave home and seek better lives elsewhere. Though some attention is given in what follows to individuals, my chief concern is with African American churches and denominations. By all accounts, the church was the central institution within which African Americans expressed their corporate self. Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the impact of the Great Migration on churches in the North and in the South. The Second Emancipation's historiography is mostly devoted to socioeconomic considerations, or it is framed by the "race relations" imperative. Scholarly studies that give attention to the Great Migration generally belong to the subfield of urban studies and are concerned with issues of race and class, with ghetto formation, and with labor questions.⁵ Cultural considerations are slighted, and a sustained focus on the most important cultural institution in African American communities—the church—is missing.

African American religious studies as a specialty within the American Academy of Religion is nearly a quarter-century old and has yielded a rich and varied harvest. Though we as yet have no comprehensive history, an

increasing number of excellent studies contribute to the larger enterprise.⁶ When the chronicle of African American religion is written, attention to the impact of the Great Migration must be incorporated. For reasons that will emerge, I view the period when hundreds of thousands of African Americans left the South as critical to our understanding of contemporary African American religion. Before the Great Migration, African American church life developed, with some exceptions, independently in North and South, separated by regional economic, social, and political differences. African American Christians confronted racism in both sections of the country, but the expression of that racism and their ability to cope with it varied from place to place. As a result of the exodus, contrasting expectations of the church's mission came together in the urban North, and a more mixed religious culture emerged. Allan Spear wrote in *Black Chicago* (1967),

Of all aspects of community life, religious activities were most profoundly influenced by the migration. Before the war, the large, middle-class Baptist and Methodist churches had dominated Negro religious life. . . . Although they had not completely discarded the emotionalism of the traditional Negro religion, these churches had moved toward a more decorous order of worship and a program of broad social concern. The migration brought to the city thousands of Negroes accustomed to the informal, demonstrative, preacher-orientated churches of the rural south.⁷

Another pivotal outcome of the Great Migration is reflected in the emergence of the first wave of scholarly studies of black churches. The standard by which African American churches were judged was created by those whom I shall call the instrumentalists. These were religious and secular leaders, mostly but not exclusively in the North, who attempted to redirect a greater proportion of denominational resources and the focus of church life from internal to external concerns. The debate between northern Social Gospelers (the instrumentalists) and southern leaders fearful of losing the old-time religion (the traditionalists) reflected in many respects the ideological conflict between W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington that lingered long after Washington's death in 1915.

Many discussions of African American churches today assume that their normative mission is to serve the community by being agents of social change. Less interest is given to the internal life of the churches, that is,

specifically to churches as arenas in which matters of ultimate meaning and concern are addressed. The Great Migration propelled this preoccupation with black churches as the means to ends other than those of offering members spiritual refreshment and a place to worship. The instrumentalists were influenced by the Social Gospel movement and principally concerned themselves with urban churches. After it became apparent that the Great Migration did not bring about a wholesale redistribution of African Americans, they turned their attention to southern churches, specifically southern rural churches, which were presumed to be retrogressive. One emphasis of this study, then, is on how the instrumentalists came to dominate the discussion of the mission of African American churches, North and South, after World War I.

Debate and discussion of the meaning of African American religion in the last decades of the twentieth century follows channels cut in the aftermath of the Great Migration. The bipolar categories of "protest" and "accommodation" used by contemporary analysts may have replaced the older language of "this-worldly" and "other-worldly," but the tendency to establish mutually exclusive realms constrains our understanding of African American religion.⁸ Authors, particularly those who were themselves active in the generational shift toward Black Consciousness or sympathetic to the involvement of churches in the civil rights movement, understandably leaned toward the "protest" model and applauded those denominations that had progressive leadership. In the protest vs. accommodation paradigm certain black denominational traditions fared better than others in the debate over the function and meaning of contemporary African American Christianity. For example, the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., received low marks for not being directly involved in the civil rights movement while under the leadership of Joseph H. Jackson.⁹ Churches belonging to the "sanctified" tradition, such as black Holiness-Pentecostal groups, also fared poorly in scholarly accounts structured on the paradigm. These varieties of African American religion continue to be labeled "conversionist sects" and are said to exemplify "a desire by many African Americans to return to 'that old-time religion.'"¹⁰ Pentecostalism, particularly under the banner of the Church of God in Christ, is today the fastest-growing religious sector among African Americans, yet it has been the subject of strong criticism for not being in the vanguard of the "protest" movement, and it did not even appear in the U.S. Census of Religious Bodies until 1926.¹¹

A historical puzzle exists here that cannot be solved without a deeper understanding of the time crucible when bearers of that old-time religion came into the urban North. Black Baptist and Methodist denominations in the North, having put aside much of the emotional exuberance in their own pasts, looked askance at the newcomers and their exotic spirituality, and the reformers within and without the established churches measured the migrants against the new benchmark of social and political protest. Ironically, the Pentecostals and their religious kin grew in numbers in urban environments until they outdistanced the older mainstream churches. As we near the end of the twentieth century, debate over the meaning and mission of the black church continues, but signs of convergence have emerged. Black churches are expected to be socially and politically active as well as true to what some have begun to call the "core" African American cultural tradition.¹² This tradition, surprisingly, has its roots in the often-criticized southern and predominantly rural worship practices of the migrants. The emerging canon for the African American church seems to be one that calls for the incorporation of distinctively "black" (variously defined) cultural forms of worship yoked with a prophetic and activist ministry. Once again we must look to the era of the Great Migration for help in understanding the roots of this shift in the paradigm.

To gauge the watershed significance of the Great Migration, I begin in chapter 1 with an overview of conditions in the South before World War I. Chapter 2 discusses the exodus itself within the context of the debate over the future of African Americans. Chapter 3 attempts to probe the deeper meaning of the Great Migration as a salvation event, to see it from the vantage point of the migrants who read providential import into it. In chapter 4 I examine the responses of the principal African American denominations to what many leaders declared was an institutional crisis of unprecedented magnitude. The regional redistribution of large numbers of African Americans not only threatened existing ecclesiastical arrangements but, according to the jeremiad of the day, portended a loss of faith. Chapter 5 considers the challenges set before existing northern African American churches by the influx of thousands of refugees from the South who were considered religious and racial kin. I offer a significantly different assessment of the outreach made by the mainline churches to the migrants than can be gleaned from the older scholarly literature. To present the story of the process by which northern religious communities attempted to change the migrants, and, in turn, the migrant influx altered

the urban cultural landscape, chapter 6 discusses one particular northern city—Chicago. “Chicago,” Charles S. Johnson wrote in 1923, “is in more than one sense the colored capital and in every sense the top of the world for bruised, crushed, and thwarted manhood of the South.”¹³ From 1910 until 1920 Chicago’s African American population increased 148 percent. The city’s religious map was redrawn by the Great Migration, and a more complex and diversified urban religious culture resulted. In chapter 7 the interaction of northern and southern black religious cultures is examined, and an argument is made for the southernization of northern African American religion. Chapter 8 extends this study’s emphasis on exploring the long-range impact of the rural-to-urban movements by returning to the South and assessing the point of view employed by pioneering surveys and scholarly studies of African American churches.

This history is not institutional in the narrow sense, certainly not church history by someone who must operate within the constraints of denominational expectations. Yet I consciously highlight the mainline African American denominations because of the inordinate attention that scholarly and popular accounts of the period between the two world wars have given to what is commonly termed “the rise of the cults and sects.”¹⁴ By attempting to offset the tilt toward the exotic, I also mean to challenge the assumption that African Americans in urban areas flocked to the so-called cults and sects because the mainline churches failed to make meaningful efforts to meet their spiritual and material needs. My own assessment is more charitable, though the reasons for it can become clear only when we have established how the black church came to be the principal institutional vehicle to which the migrants, and those who sought to assist them, turned when it was realized that the Great Migration was a harbinger of the future.

Finally, readers are forewarned that the perspective occasionally shifts within chapters. These shifts occur because I view the Great Migration as both an event and a process. While the archetypal migrants are those who went from southern fields to northern factories, I recognize, as Carole Marks has argued, that many migrants had earlier experiences as nonagricultural laborers in the urban South.¹⁵ Our lens will focus primarily on the exodus from the South to the urban, industrial North, but we must remember that African Americans also were moving into southern cities during these decades. I also acknowledge that the magnitude of the exodus from the South during the years from 1940 to 1960 was larger than that of the World War I era.

The publication in 1991 of Nicholas Lemann's *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* has stimulated discussion of the migration northward of southern blacks and its effects on contemporary American life. Much of the current debate focuses on the causes of the persistence of black poverty in urban America.¹⁶ Lemann's subject matter, as Tom Bethell pointed out in the *American Spectator*, is essentially about the "unfinished business" that the United States has in overcoming "its original sin of slavery."¹⁷ By the time that Lemann's migrants enter into the Promised Land, the road had been well-traveled by an earlier generation that participated in the first Great Migration. If they came with more optimism, it was because the patterns and formulations of twentieth-century urban African American life were yet to be demarcated and fully revealed. Thus, these earlier migrants may have correctly believed that America's "original sin" could be atoned for by entering into the Promised Land.

In the debate over the nature and mission of the African American church, participants too often set the rural church against the urban church, the other-worldly against the this-worldly, the spiritual against the social. Those partial to activist agendas deemed the rural church retrogressive while hailing urban churches as the vanguard of progress. Those defending theologically conservative, even fundamentalist, definitions of church put the highest priority on "saving souls." The following history of African American churches during and after the Great Migration demonstrates that the traditional framing of the debate in oppositional categories fails to do justice to the diverse ways in which African Americans expressed their religious hope, either institutionally or individually. In my analysis of the Great Migration and African American religion, I do not privilege one side of the debate over another. Instead, I argue that as a result of the Great Migration two differing understandings of the church's function met, and in that conjunction an important transformation and re-creation took place. Perhaps as a result of the following analysis, we shall come to understand that the this-worldly vs. other-worldly paradigm for discussing the African American religious experience should be put to rest. At the very least, I hope to convince readers of the critical importance of the Great Migration. In the words of Hans Baer and Merrill Singer, "As the primary institution available for responding to external threat and challenge, as well as internal aspiration and expression, the African-American church was remade anew in the shadow of the Great Migration."¹⁸

1

DOWN

IN

EGYPT-

LAND



On the morning of October 21, 1916, Anthony Crawford parked his wagon in front of W. D. Barksdale's mercantile store in Abbeville, South Carolina. The owner of 427 acres of prime cotton land, Crawford raised a family of twelve sons and four daughters and through hard work and persistence had become the wealthiest black farmer in Abbeville County. Exactly why Crawford went in to see the white merchant that fateful day is not known, though Barksdale purchased cotton from area farmers and sold them seed and supplies on credit. Barksdale and Crawford fell into an argument, reportedly over the price of cotton. The merchant accused the farmer of being a liar, and the farmer cursed the merchant. A white mob gathered at the store. Crawford sought refuge in a partially covered pit in the ground at a nearby cotton gin house and armed himself with a sledge hammer. When the mob rushed him, Crawford struck one of his attackers, McKinny Cann, smashing his skull with the hammer. A rock thrown by a member of the mob knocked the black farmer down. Crawford struggled to his feet, someone knifed him in the back, and he lost consciousness.

The Abbeville sheriff arrived and temporarily stayed the bloodthirst of the mob with the promise that Crawford would be kept in jail until it was known whether Cann would live. By midafternoon a second mob gathered

at the jail, incensed by talk that the sheriff planned to spirit Crawford away on the four o'clock train. Acting out a scenario that plagued many black communities of the pre-Great Migration South, the mob broke into the jail, took Crawford, tied a rope around his neck, and dragged him through the black sector of town. At the edge of the fairgrounds, the rioters hanged Crawford's lifeless body from a pine tree and fired several hundred bullets into it. The all-white coroner's jury, despite the ritual spectacle enacted in the presence of numerous witnesses, failed to name anyone responsible for the tragedy in Abbeville.

Whites talked of burning the Crawford house but contented themselves with closing down black businesses in Abbeville and passing an ordinance demanding that Crawford's children, nine of whom were married and lived around their father's farm, leave their land within two weeks. Though the resolution was later revoked, the prospects of further antiblack violence precipitated an exodus from the county, as had happened after the Phoenix riot of 1898 when whites attacked blacks who were attempting to vote in Greenwood County, South Carolina. Some migrants from the Abbeville-Greenwood area headed for north Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where a sizable colony of blacks from the region had already gone. The murder of Anthony Crawford remained for a long time in the collective memory of black Philadelphians.¹

Crawford's death at the hands of a white mob was not unusual in the pre-World War I decades. The use of rope and faggot to intimidate and punish blacks was common in the South. There were 754 lynchings of blacks in the United States in the first decade of the twentieth century. Between 1900 and 1909, 92 percent of the lynchings took place in the South (including Missouri), as compared to 82 percent in the 1890s. In the nineties 32.2 percent of the victims were white, but between 1900 and 1909 the ratio of white victims decreased to 11.4 percent. As the historian C. Vann Woodward observed, lynching "was becoming an increasingly Southern and racial phenomenon."² In 1910 sixty-seven African Americans were lynched. Though the aggregate number of lynchings in the second decade of the twentieth century was not as large as in the 1890s, when lynchings peaked, one person was lynched in the South every five days, and the ratio of black to white lynchings was ten to one, a disparity that held into the 1930s.³

Anthony Crawford's murder struck a raw nerve because it took place when many were puzzling over the causes of the black exodus that began as a trickle in the summer of 1916 and rapidly was becoming a major

tributary. Contemporary observers pointed to the expanding labor market stimulated by the outbreak of war in Europe as the lure attracting southern blacks from the South. Historians embellish this economic thesis with detailed descriptions of regional disparities in wages, fluctuations in the price of cotton, and the effects of farm mechanization. Wartime and post-war studies emphasized the primacy of economic forces, as did Edward E. Lewis's book, *The Mobility of the Negro*, which helped to canonize the now familiar interpretive paradigm of the "pull" of the industrial demand for labor in the North and the "push" of agricultural disorganization in the Cotton Belt.⁴ In *The South Since 1865*, a general survey of changes in the region since the Civil War, John Samuel Ezell flatly stated: "The desire for economic improvement was the Negroes' chief motive for heading north."⁵

Anthony Crawford and his family, however, did not fit the profile of the black tenants or sharecroppers who lived on the razor's edge of economic ruin or of the landless poor who were already drifting to the South's larger towns and cities. By virtue of hard work, thrift, and a good business sense, the patriarch of the Crawfords had become the epitome of success. Following the dictum of Booker T. Washington delivered in 1895 at the Cotton Exposition in Atlanta, Crawford had cast down his bucket where he was. His landholdings amounted to almost 10 percent of all the property owned by African Americans in Abbeville County. His success proved to be his undoing, at least in the eyes of one observer. "Crawford was worth around \$20,000 and that is more than most white farmers are worth down here. Property ownership always make the negro more assertive, more independent, and the poor whites can't stand it." They hated to see "a 'nigger' forge ahead of them, and they lay for a chance to jump him."⁶ If we are to understand the full significance of the Great Migration as a religious event, then we must come to terms with the deeper meaning of what happened in Abbeville in the fall of 1916.

The murder of Anthony Crawford, who not incidentally had been secretary of the Chappelle African Methodist Episcopal Church for nineteen years and its largest contributor, suggests that the causes of the exodus of nearly a half million African Americans from the South during World War I are not fully exposed by pointing to economic variables. Crawford's mutilated and savaged body, which one witness described as a "mass of bloody pulp," put the lie to the southern myth that by playing according to the rules blacks could coexist with whites with some hope of the good

things of life promised by Booker T. Washington's philosophy. In *The Man Farthest Down*, published in 1912, Washington had argued that African Americans were better off in the South than were the depressed classes of Europe in their homelands. He maintained that "more than anywhere else, the colored people seem to have discovered that, in gaining habits of thrift and industry, in getting property, and in making themselves useful, there is a door of hope open for them which the South has no disposition to close."⁷ Ironically, Washington's remarks were published during an outbreak of Ku Klux Klan violence in Mississippi that targeted prosperous African Americans of the class to which Anthony Crawford belonged. His murder gave the lie to Washington's proposition that the achievement of material prosperity by African Americans was the solution to "the race problem" in the South.

By briefly surveying conditions of African American life in the South on the eve of the Great Migration before examining the state of health of the black southern church, we can better understand the subsequent exodus as the religious event that it was. African Americans invested the Great Migration with religious meaning precisely because they understood that what happened to Anthony Crawford could happen to them, no matter what their economic status or how carefully they negotiated the dangerous labyrinth of racial politics in the South. The potential for white violence was always present. Without political and civil rights, southern blacks lived a precarious existence. Whatever toehold they had on material prosperity was threatened by their inability to protect themselves against indiscriminate violence.

The *Atlanta Constitution* acknowledged on December 10, 1916, "Lynching was indeed a cause behind the black exodus The heaviest migration of Negroes has been from those counties in which there have been the worst outbreaks against Negroes."⁸ African Americans felt particularly vulnerable to lynch law because the federal authorities had adopted the policy that the "Negro Problem" was something best left to the white South. Following the contested election of 1876, Republicans in order to hold onto the White House gave up on efforts to protect the rights of southern blacks. The Compromise of 1877 gave the election to Rutherford B. Hayes, but it left blacks in the South to the mercy of whites committed to racial supremacy. Conservative southerners used the states' rights argument to deflect any outside criticism of the treatment of African Americans. Fred-

erick Douglass commented on the effects of the doctrine of states' rights, or local white control, in 1889. "This idea of self-government," he said, "destroyed the Freedman's Bureau, drove United States soldiers out of the South, expelled Northern immigrants, excluded Negro citizens from State legislatures, and gave all the power to the Southern slavemasters."⁹

After the approximately 4 million slaves became free by virtue of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 and then became citizens of the United States with the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, an air of jubilation prevailed. Many former slaves believed that God had a hand in their deliverance. A black woman in Virginia said of the miraculous end of slavery, "Isn't I a free woman now! De Lord can make Heaven out of Hell any time, I do believe."¹⁰ This atmosphere of hope deteriorated during the Reconstruction period, when it became clear that southern whites and their conservative allies in the federal government would fiercely contest each political or social gain made by the Freedmen. The dismantling of the Reconstruction agencies, coupled with a resurgence of white power in the South and federal complicity with southern white interests, struck hard at the ex-slaves' dreams of freedom, forty acres, and a mule.¹¹

In their search for a place free of the domination of whites, some southern blacks experimented with the formation of all-black towns such as Mound Bayou, Mississippi, and Boley, Oklahoma. About sixty such communities were organized between 1865 and 1915, but the total number of inhabitants represented a small proportion of the South's African American population.¹² Lacking federal initiative and support, a massive exchange of place was impossible. In 1879 Senator William Windom of Minnesota, troubled by the failure of the federal government to protect black civil rights, introduced a resolution in Congress to study the practicality of encouraging blacks to leave the South. His proposal drew little support. European immigrants were filling the need for unskilled labor in the North and Midwest, and antiblack sentiment did not confine itself to the South.

Despite the lack of federal relocation assistance, southern blacks needed no persuasion, and some of them sought better lives elsewhere. Shortly after the removal of federal troops from the South and the reintroduction of political control by whites who bemoaned the defeat of the Confederacy, African Americans began to look for a way out of the region. Senator Windom's resolution was blamed for the spread of the Kansas Fever Idea in the rural parishes and counties of Louisiana and Mississippi. However,

as historian Nell Painter points out, southern blacks were already anxious to move and were of the belief that the federal government would provide them with free transportation, land, and supplies.¹³

The largest contingent, perhaps four to five thousand, followed Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, a cabinetmaker who claimed "divine inspiration," to Kansas beginning in 1879. Known as the "Exodusters," many of these refugees were from Mississippi, which was one of the first southern states to reintroduce a white supremacist government. Black leaders such as Henry Highland Garnet and Sojourner Truth, veterans of the pre-Civil War abolitionist struggle, endorsed the exodus to "John Brown's" Kansas. But Douglass opposed the Kansas migration on the grounds that it was ill-timed and badly organized. More fundamentally, he believed that by staying in the South blacks could exercise greater political muscle by virtue of their demographic concentration. "The public and noisy advocacy of a general stampede of the colored people from South to the North," Douglass maintained, "is necessarily an abandonment of the great and paramount principle of protection to person and property in every state of the Union."¹⁴ Douglass held the minority position among African American leaders, and he would later temper his optimism that the white South was amenable to change.

Douglass's skepticism of the exodus to Kansas was borne out. It was short-lived and of modest size. Kansas was cold, much of the land was infertile, and nonfarm jobs were scarce. Those who went to Kansas were motivated by a desire for personal liberty and economic opportunity. But they differed from the host of African Americans who fled the South beginning in 1916 in one important aspect. In her detailed study of the Kansas fever, Painter concludes, "The Exodus was a rural-to-rural migration, at least in intent, whereas the later movement was a rural-to-urban. After the turn of the century, the Afro-American quest for land subsided, or turned into a hunt for jobs. In a sense, then the Exodus was atavistic, for the fundamental drift of American population in the late nineteenth and the twentieth century was toward the cities."¹⁵

In 1880 6,580,793 African Americans lived in the United States, constituting 13.1 percent of the nation's total population. Approximately 90 percent lived in the former Confederate states. In the last decades of the nineteenth century a small percentage of black southerners were leaving the South and settling in northern cities. These migrants were generally individuals whom W. E. B. Du Bois called "The Talented Tenth." They were

better educated than most black southerners or had skills with which they hoped to cope in the North.¹⁶ Northern employers showed little interest in importing unskilled black workers from the South, except as strikebreakers or domestic help. For example, when stockyard workers went on strike in Chicago in 1894 and in 1905, management sought black laborers from the South.¹⁷ This outflow to northern industrial centers was the exception that proved the rule. More commonly, African Americans living in the South as the last decades of the nineteenth century got under way expected to remain there. Their destiny, for good or bad, was intertwined with that of whites, as it had been before and after Emancipation.

In 1886 Henry Grady of the *Atlanta Constitution* began a campaign to attract northern investors. This apostle of the New South was eager to bring his region into the mainstream of American life. To those who asked what was to be done with "the Negro," Grady responded that a "racial instinct" would keep blacks and whites separate.¹⁸ Confirmation that African Americans were to be relegated to a separate place in social and political life of the New South came in the watershed decade of the 1890s, when the force of law was added to social custom, notably in the Supreme Court's ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. The decision prescribed segregated seating on trains and served as the legal justification for systematic segregation in many other areas. *Plessy v. Ferguson* cast a pall over the lives of black southerners, regardless of education or location, by defining personal liberty in spatial terms.¹⁹ Jim Crow laws became more rigid and consistent, and by 1900 signs saying "Whites Only" or "Colored" hung from public facilities all over the South. Whether on the streetcar or at a drinking fountain, at school or in a hospital, at work or at play, black Americans, regardless of their behavior or accomplishments, were reminded on a daily basis that they were still in Egyptland. Ray Stannard Baker, the investigative journalist who wrote for *McClure's* magazine, said after a visit to Atlanta in 1906, "After I had begun to trace the colour line I found evidences of it everywhere—literally in every department of life."²⁰

The color line that Baker observed split the southern Populist movement in the 1890s. The agrarian radicals attempted to form a third party by appealing to the interests of both white and black farmers. The Populist credo and economic doctrines pitted all those who worked the land against corporate greed and monopoly. The South's best-known Populist, Tom Watson, said, "The accident of color can make no difference in the interest of farmers, croppers, and laborers."²¹ Efforts to bridge the color

line in the Populist crusade came up against deep-seated prejudices and fears of "Negro domination" raised by southern Democrats. The election of Grover Cleveland in 1892 gave southern Democrats additional clout in their contest with the agrarian reformers. To hang onto the votes of white farmers and laborers, Populist leaders ceased to condemn lynching and racial discrimination. Tom Watson's rhetoric became increasingly filled with antiblack sentiment. Once Democratic politicians in the South felt that they had the Populists on the run, they no longer attempted to attract black voters. The defeat of the Populist movement left a legacy of racial bitterness and further isolated African Americans in the South from any significant political participation.²²

Democratic control of southern politics was now secured. Blacks who attempted to vote were controlled by whites-only primaries, the manipulation of voter registration, literacy tests, the use of unlabeled ballot boxes, and, when all else failed, intimidation and violence.²³ African Americans in the South on the eve of the Great Migration were a subject people without the right of political participation. The political process offered little hope of change from within. The demise of the Populist crusade and the solidification of conservative white power made Booker T. Washington's appeals for loyalty to the region sound all the more hollow. Even in supposedly racially moderate states, such as North Carolina where the African American novelist Charles Chesnutt grew up, conditions worsened. The antiblack outbreak of violence engulfed Wilmington in 1898 and caused Chesnutt to despair all the more. He visited Wilmington in 1901 to study the causes of the riot and incorporated his findings in the novel *The Marrow of Tradition*. Two years later Chesnutt summed up the southern situation: "The rights of the Negroes are at a lower ebb than at any time during the thirty-five years of their freedom, and the race prejudice more intense and uncompromising."²⁴

In its initial phase the Great Migration was composed primarily of unskilled young males, but southern black women had left their homes to work as domestics in the North before World War I. Their experiences did not cast a favorable light on the northern city and contributed to the notion that the South was the "Negro's home." With the assistance of Helen Keller, the National League for the Protection of Colored Women was organized to aid those young women who found themselves subject to exploitation and moral risk in the large cities. S. Willie Layten, general secretary of the League based in New York City, wrote in 1910 of the "swarm of

Northern harpies and procuresses whose business is to meet the incoming masses, and under pretense of assisting them to find homes and work, land them in dens of infamy and shame.”²⁵ Ray Stannard Baker addressed the League at its headquarters in January 1910. “One finds something unspeakably pathetic in the spectacle of these untold thousands of Negroes who are coming North,” Baker wrote. “To many of them oppressed with the limitations set up in the South, it is indeed the promised land.”²⁶ Layten, whatever her personal views of the North as “the promised land,” wanted potential migrants to be better prepared. Pastors of southern churches were sent instructions to be given to women anxious for employment in the North. The women were told not to come until they had learned to do “good housework.” Costs were high, the climate severe, employment agents often dishonest, and female migrants were lured into prostitution.

Though a vanguard of southern blacks like these domestic workers came North before World War I, most African Americans remained below the Mason-Dixon Line. At the end of the twentieth century’s first decade the U.S. Census Bureau reported that nearly nine of ten African Americans lived in the South (8,749,427 or 89 percent of a total population of 9,827,763). This figure was only slightly less than the 91.1 percent distribution in 1790 when the first federal census was taken. Seven of ten African Americans lived in rural areas or small towns with an essentially agrarian ethos. The census bureau classified places with 2,500 or more inhabitants as urban, hardly significant in light of common definitions of the city, then or now. A town two or three times the size deemed “urban” by the census-takers if set in an agricultural belt was ruled by the ethos of cotton and the accompanying rural culture. Millions of black southerners who were tied to the land, either as tenants or croppers, lived in a state of economic peonage not far removed from the condition of chattel slavery that they, their parents, and their grandparents had known.²⁷

Of forty-three cities with African American populations of 10,000 or more in 1910, thirty-three were in the South. Washington, D.C., led with 95,000 African American residents, more than twice the African American population of Chicago and about 3,000 more than its nearest rival, New York City. Birmingham had a black population of 52,305, whereas Chicago had only 44,101, and the comparable counts for Atlanta and Detroit were, respectively, 51,902 and 5,741. In 1910 the statistical center of the nation’s black population was 5.4 miles north-northeast of Fort Payne in De Kalb County, Alabama. Since 1880 it had moved progressively farther in a south-

westerly direction. More African Americans were classified as rural dwellers than ever before, in spite of the drift toward cities in the South. Black farm owners cultivated nearly 16 million acres, and the number of African American farmers had increased since 1900 in every state except West Virginia and Louisiana. Blacks made up only 6.3 percent of the nation's urban dwellers, 2.8 percent in the South and 2.4 percent in the North.²⁸

Rural-to-urban migration accelerated within the South before World War I because of the rise of industrial centers such as Birmingham and the attraction of cities such as Atlanta. Smaller towns like Athens, Georgia, also experienced a growth in black population in the early 1900s. "The constant trend of negroes townwards," Thomas J. Woofter wrote in a 1913 study of Athens, created "a different set of social problems from those presented by the rural negroes."²⁹ A subsequent examination of Clarke County, in which Athens was located, revealed that both whites and blacks were leaving the land, the white tenant class going to the cotton mills and blacks to towns.³⁰ In the towns and cities of the South black labor was frequently confined to service and domestic employment. The influx of poorly educated and ill-trained blacks from the countryside to the urban South was seen as a threat by whites, and, beginning with Baltimore in 1911, most southern cities enacted laws to enforce residential segregation.³¹

Though southern cities, magnet like, drew blacks off the land, they were not oases of opportunity. Rural migrants clung to the bottom rungs of the economic and social ladder. Their plight caught the attention of black institutions such as Atlanta University, which held a conference in 1898 focusing on how churches were meeting the needs of the southern urban poor. "Atlanta, with her back alleys and slums," the Rev. Henry Hugh Proctor proclaimed, "is a fine field of work." He urged Atlanta's black churches to "parcel out the field and each take a particular set of alleys for the work of general betterment."³² Proctor, a graduate of Fisk University who also attended Yale Divinity School, served Atlanta's First Congregational Church from 1894 until 1919. After the Atlanta race riot of 1906, he intensified efforts to reach out to the urban poor, many of whom were recent migrants from the open countryside. First Congregational operated a nonsectarian community center, a home for working girls, an employment bureau, a cooking school, a kindergarten, a gymnasium, and it supported an orphanage and mission work in poorer neighborhoods.³³

The drift toward southern cities was caused not only by discontent with rural conditions but by the persistent belief that the North was not a viable

alternative. James Samuel Stemons wrote in 1898 on "The Industrial Color Line in the North and the Remedy" for the *AME Church Review*. A supporter of the Industrial Rights League, which sought to have employers take a pledge disavowing industrial discrimination on Christian principles, Stemons believed that conditions had actually worsened for black workers in the North since the Civil War. He decried the lack of industrial jobs, racism in the trade union movement, and the failure of the Christian churches to "unlock the doors of manual labor to the colored race."³⁴ Richard R. Wright, Jr., an African Methodist clergyman with graduate training in sociology, wrote extensively on the economic barriers faced by African Americans in the industrialized North. Of Philadelphia, Wright stated, "Negroes have been largely shut out of mechanical trades, partly because of indifference and occasional active hostility of labor unions, partly because it has been difficult to overcome the traditional notion that a 'Negro's place' is in domestic service, but chiefly because there has been very little and practically no opportunity for Negroes to learn trades."³⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois accentuated the point, writing in 1903, "In general the Negro in Northern cities has become a problem. The center of that problem is the question of occupations—the problem of work."³⁶

Because of discouraging job prospects in the North, those who felt that African Americans should remain in the South had their views confirmed. President William Howard Taft told the graduating class at Hampton Institute in 1914, "After this experience at Hampton today and after studying the North and the South, it seems to me that while the North has apparently been the more fortunate section for a number of decades, it is the South now that has a definite future before it which it can work out; and it is the North which is struggling amid changed and chaotic conditions, the future tendency of which is uncertain."³⁷ Robert R. Moton, commandant of cadets at Hampton Institute, told the Southern Sociological Congress in May 1914 that the South afforded more opportunity than the North, particularly because the region had been unable to attract foreign immigrants into its labor market. For its own self-interest, Moton asserted, the white South "should offer every possible inducement for the Negroes to remain in the South and on the land where they can rear their children amid physical and moral surroundings conducive to their highest development and greater usefulness to themselves and to the state."³⁸

A deep bias against city life conditioned the attitude of some African American leaders. In 1903 Bishop Cornelius T. Shaffer of the African Meth-

odist Episcopal Church answered the question "Shall the Negro leave the South?" with another query, "Are his environments in the South conducive to his working out his highest and noblest destiny?" After arguing that southern blacks experienced humiliation and dehumanization at every turn, Shaffer declared, "I am free to say the Negro should seek another arena upon which to play his part in the great drama of life. . . ." ³⁹ But he advised African Americans to scatter across the country, take up unoccupied lands, and avoid the crowded cities. Cities had a corrupting influence, he believed, a view shared by educators who sought the uplift of southern blacks. "The way of salvation for the Negro," E. C. Branson, professor of rural economics at the State Normal School in Athens, Georgia, opined, "is not along the paved highways of city civilization. In the cities he is waging a losing battle. The ravages of drink and drug evils, the vices and diseases of the slums, make swift and certain inroads upon the race as a whole in the congested centers of our population." ⁴⁰

Northern blacks, even those with a vested interest in improving city life, were not enthusiastic about a wholesale flight of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North. The *New York Age*, an African American newspaper generally known for its progressive politics, featured an article "Life Conditions in the City and in the Country" in 1912. The unnamed author felt that conditions for African Americans were worse in northern urban centers than in cities of the South because of the nature of industrial struggle. "The cruel Molock grinds them to powder; only the best of them survive, one in ten perhaps, and that one is not always a strong and useful member of society." The article quoted with approbation the remarks of Booker T. Washington, delivered in 1912 in Carnegie Hall at a meeting of the Men and Religion Forward Movement. Washington had asserted, "In the rural districts, the Negro, all things considered, is at his best in body, mind and soul. In the city he is usually at his worst. Plainly one of the duties of the church is to help keep the Negro where he has the best chance." ⁴¹

The dominant view before World War I was that blacks should not be divorced from the soil. Even George Edmund Haynes, professor of social science at Fisk University and director of the National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes, bowed to majority opinion. Established in 1911, the Urban League was an outgrowth of two organizations—the Committee for Improving Industrial Conditions of Negroes in New York and the National League for the Protection of Colored Women—

plus research on the social and economic status of African Americans in New York City that Haynes had done.⁴² The Urban League concerned itself with helping African Americans secure jobs and adjust to city life. In 1912 Haynes gave an address at the annual Hampton Institute conference. After reviewing statistics on the movement of blacks toward urban centers and noting the agricultural, commercial, and social causes of this demographic trend, Haynes said, "I do not mean to advocate the idea that Negroes *should* migrate from the country to the city"⁴³

Social workers echoed Haynes's concern with urban problems and pointed to the high price black migrants paid on entering the struggle for survival in the northern city. They too expressed reservations about a mass exodus from the South. Lilian Brandt, secretary of the social research committee of the New York Charity Organization Society, wrote in 1905 that African Americans were best suited to agricultural environments. The African American was not, in her estimation, able to cope with urban conditions and would become "a serious problem—a problem which we cannot escape by the reflection that this migration city-ward was no part of our original plan when we brought him to help us develop our new land, and one which is increasing in importance at a rapid rate."⁴⁴ Preoccupied with the plight of the urban poor whose ranks had been swelled by European immigrants, northern social workers such as Brandt were content to leave the fate of African Americans in the South to southern whites. They adopted the view implicit in Thomas Nelson Page's 1904 book, *The Negro: The Southerner's Problem*. In it Page asks, rhetorically, "Now that the race problem in the South has been laid down and discussed, what solution of it do you offer—what have you to propose to ammeliorate the conditions which have grown out of that problem?" His answer: "None, but to leave it to work itself out along the lines of economic laws, with such aid as may be rendered by an enlightened public spirit and a broad-minded patriotism."⁴⁵

White conservatives in the South readily accepted the argument that blacks should remain under their tutelage. J. B. Gambrell, editor of the *Baptist Standard* (Dallas), wrote in 1912, "The Negroes we will have with us always." Gambrell believed that the race question was "peculiarly a Southern problem because we are next to it." Echoing the arguments of the antebellum white missionaries who sought access to the slaves, Gambrell pleaded with his readers to assume the task of raising up the "weaker race" to the standards of the white South. Blacks were not going to return to

Africa in “any appreciable number,” nor were they going to “die out as a race.” They had planted themselves “in the soil to stay,” so that white Baptists, for reasons of self-protection if nothing else, should aid in educating them and preparing them for the future. “If the white people of the South,” Gambrell maintained, “prove themselves worthy of the Saxon race, which great race that has been the torch bearer of civilization in the ascent of nations through struggling centuries—if the white people will deal kindly and justly by the weaker race, prosperity is assured.”⁴⁶

The paternalism of white conservatives was predicated on the assumption that blacks and whites would continue to interact according to the Atlanta Compromise proposed by Tuskegee’s Washington. In 1895 at the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition Washington called on both races to cooperate “in all things essential to mutual progress” for the welfare of the South. But he disavowed any interest in “social equality.” Du Bois, who was still teaching at Wilberforce University, wrote to Washington in 1895, “Let me heartily congratulate you upon your phenomenal success at Atlanta—it was a word fitly spoken.”⁴⁷ Du Bois later became Washington’s chief ideological rival, waging battle from his new post as professor of sociology at Atlanta University. The Washington-Du Bois debate began in earnest in 1903 when *The Souls of Black Folk* appeared. In it, Du Bois criticized the “industrial” educational philosophy of the Tuskegee Machine and Washington’s accommodationist politics. Two years later Du Bois attended the famous Niagara Falls conference that gave birth to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909.⁴⁸

Washington’s strategy of developing separate black institutions in the South without challenging the dominant power structure became less viable as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth. A strain of white racism more virulent than that with which Washington contended in 1895 had become pervasive. Radical white racists displaced temperate advocates of the New South by promulgating the theory of black retrogression. These propagandists of white supremacy asserted that blacks as a “race” could not expect to rise above the mudsill of civilization and were a burden to the South. Historian Joel Williamson argues that the break between Washington and Du Bois needs to be understood against this background. He writes, “In effect, the white people with whom Washington had negotiated a *modus vivendi* in 1895 were, by 1900, rapidly losing control to people who had radically different ideas about the proper state of relations between the races. In the black belts of the South white attitudes of

accommodation rapidly melted into universal rejection, and burning and bloody aggression.”⁴⁹ The influence of the radical racists became apparent during the Great Migration when some white southerners took perverse pleasure in observing that their northern critics now also confronted “the Negro problem.” As one Virginian put it, “We see in the Negroes’ dispersal throughout the North not only a relief to our own sorely tried communities, but a distribution of the evils, which their presence creates everywhere you find them in any number.”⁵⁰

The plight of blacks in the former Confederate states was compounded by indifference and outright hostility among most white politicians and intellectuals. The southern white perspective dominated academic circles in which the “problem of the Negro” held center stage. John H. Stanfield points out that “empirical inquiries into the conditions of blacks was the province of Southerners or researchers employed in Southern-based institutions.”⁵¹ These intellectuals focused primarily on questions of “adjustment” under the assumption that the white South would continue to deal with a large population of blacks in its midst. African Americans were to remain under the tutelage and control of southern whites. Southern missionaries on the topic of race lectured in the North attempting to sell the idea of a “New South” that would prove economically beneficial to northerners at the expense of any interference by liberals on “the race question.” The Republican party under the leadership of President William Howard Taft sought alliances with white conservatives in the South at the expense of protecting blacks.

Woodrow Wilson’s inauguration in 1913 sealed the fate of the few remaining black Republicans who had survived the retreat of northern Republicans. Democrats who controlled the White House on the eve of the Great Migration put a low priority on improving race relations, supported segregation in federal agencies, and allowed southern white politicians excessive influence in national policy. In 1915 President Wilson permitted the film *Birth of a Nation* to be shown in the White House, and afterward, though the film displayed a blatantly racist attitude at many points,⁵² the president said that it was “like writing history with lightning.” Given this climate at the federal executive level, it is not surprising to find Williamson telling us that “the southern race problem of the nineteenth century became the national race problem of the twentieth, in part precisely because of the abandonment by the North of the Negro in the South.”⁵³

African American leaders attempted to mute the shrill voice of racism

and to counter theories of race deterioration by pointing to the headway made in the South since the Civil War. When writing about "Fifty Years of Negro Progress" in 1913 Monroe N. Work focused almost exclusively on the economic, educational, and religious strides made by African Americans since Emancipation. After accepting Booker T. Washington's invitation to come to Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in 1908, Work dedicated himself to garnering facts regarding all aspects of African American life. As head of the division of records and research at Tuskegee, Work, a sociologist trained at the University of Chicago, believed that accurate information concerning the accomplishments and needs of African Americans "would allow for other things" to improve.⁵⁴ Social and political advancement, Work believed, would be enhanced by setting the record straight regarding the progress of the "race" since slavery.

Work accentuated the positive. Since 1863 blacks had accumulated millions of dollars of church property, raised the educational standard of their clergy, and established large denominational bureaucracies, complete with publishing houses. In 1913, Work noted, the South contained fifty colleges and more than 400 normal and industrial schools for blacks. More than 1.7 million African American children attended public schools. But their schools, especially in the rural areas, were inferior to white schools in equipment and facilities. Work estimated that in 1913 the economic value of black labor to the South was \$10 million, and he highlighted the progress African Americans had made in business, trades, and the professions. Using data from the 1910 federal census, Work drew attention to a significant increase in black farm ownership since 1863.⁵⁵

Work's effort to counter white racism with empirical evidence of black progress was laudable enough, but statistics in the aggregate could not mask the widespread feeling that many blacks had of being trapped in a region where memories of slavery remained strong. The South was still Egyptland. Whatever the progress made since the Civil War, many blacks in the South thought that their circumstances were becoming more precarious. Political disfranchisement, unequal educational facilities, job discrimination, institutional prejudice, and the ever-present threat and reality of physical violence weighed heavily on the minds of those who had been told for far too long that the South was their "natural home." If we confine consideration of the Great Migration's causes to the realm of the labor economists, we do so at the expense of understanding what the *AME Church*

Review called the "atmosphere of injustice and oppression" that poisoned the aspirations of southern blacks, regardless of their social status.⁵⁶

Proponents of the Anglo-Saxon philosophy of progress perpetuated an optimistic outlook, even as more and more black southerners were showing their dissatisfaction by going up North or flocking to southern cities. Writers for the *Southern Workman*, the Hampton Institute publication, continued to use words such as "uplift," "progress," "moving ahead," and "forward."⁵⁷ Supported by white philanthropy, Hampton Institute, founded in 1868, was a center of the agrarian version of the American Dream for southern blacks. The Hampton and Tuskegee programs held up the goal of becoming self-sufficient farmers to black tenants, sharecroppers, and wage laborers. Despite the movement of blacks off the land, so that eight cities in the South had a black population of more than 40,000 in 1910, the *Southern Workman* and the *Negro Farmer and Messenger*, a Tuskegee Institute publication, held to the vision of a black South that was essentially agrarian. The pedagogical methods and ideological values embodied in the "Hampton-Tuskegee Idea" did not undergo significant change until the late 1920s.⁵⁸

The tenuous nature of the black agrarian gospel became clear in the period just before the Great Migration. When war in Europe broke out in the summer of 1914, cotton exchanges in the South were closed, and farmers, who were sitting on a record crop, saw the price of their product tumble. The extension board of the AME Church reported that many congregations in the South were suffering because their members were unable to dispose of their cotton.⁵⁹ The 1915 cotton crop was only 31.4 million acres, the smallest since 1909. Fears that the European conflict would have "calamitous consequences" for the South because of diminishing foreign sales gave way to optimism by 1916, when the price of cotton reached 16 cents a pound. It then seemed as if economic prosperity was within everyone's grasp. Farmers, according to agricultural historian Gilbert C. Fite, were paying off debts, buying clothes, shoes, furniture and automobiles. "Cotton," writes Fite, "was again king across the South."⁶⁰

At least some black farmers were participating in the war-induced prosperity. The *Savannah Press* reported that "Negro farmers are buying automobiles who were content a year ago to ride in an ox-cart, or, at best, in a new red buggy behind a \$150 mule."⁶¹ Because of this revitalization of the dream of agricultural prosperity, proprietors of the Hampton and Tuske-