African American Migration---Communities

Joshua Farrington

**African American Migration. influenced the course of slavery and freedom in Kentucky.**

As slaves, African Americans were among the first migrants to the Commonwealth of Kentucky. In 1790, slaves comprised 16 percent of the total population. By 1860, the number of blacks in the state had grown exponentially and there were approximately 250,000 slaves and 10,684 freed blacks living in the state.

In 1822, the American Colonization Society and Kentucky Colonization Society (KCS) began sponsoring the migration of free blacks to Liberia. The KCS continued to fund the exodus of former slaves from Kentucky to Liberia as late as 1856. Private efforts also assisted in the out migration of former slaves to Africa. In 1833, a Kentucky slave owner freed thirty-two of his slaves and funded their trip to Liberia. Henry Clay, one of the state’s most preeminent politicians, was a major supporter of the American Colonization Society. A group of former slaves from Kentucky settled in a Liberian town and named it Clay Ashland in his honor.

Following emancipation and the Civil War, many newly freed slaved migrated to states outside of Kentucky. Between 1860 and 1870, almost 14,000 blacks left the state for the North, and between 1850 and 1880 the African American population of the state dropped from 21 percent of the total population to 16.5 percent.

Kansas proved to be a particularly attractive destination for African Americans. During the 1870s, almost 10,000 blacks from Tennessee and Kentucky participated in the exodus to Kansas. One of the most famous of all black settlements in Kansas, Nicodemus, was formed by a group of African Americans from Lexington in 1877. W.J. Niles, a black businessman, and W.R. Hill, a white minister who had speculation interests in Kansas, actively recruited African Americans in Fayette and Scott Counties, and later became prominent leaders of the settlement. Nicodemus inspired further migration of Kentuckians and the creation of other black settlements. For example, the settlers of Kinsley, Kansas, formed in 1878, modeled themselves on Nicodemus and were primarily emigrants from Harrodsburg and Lexington. Junius Groves, well known as the “Potato King of the World,” whose farm at one time produced more potatoes than any other, was among the thousands of black Kentuckians to migrate to Kansas.

In-state migration to urban areas also flourished following Reconstruction as African Americans became more concentrated in the states’ cities. By 1890, over a third of the states’ blacks lived in urban settings, and African Americans made up large percentages of residents in Louisville, Lexington, Winchester, Frankfort, and Hopkinsville. In 1910, African Americans made up approximately 20 percent of all people living in the state’s cities, and by 1940 the figure had jumped to 55 percent.

Reasons for migration varied on an individual basis, but almost all sought to escape racism or sought better educational and economic opportunities. Many African Americans migrated north and west seeking better, industrial jobs, expanded educational options, and to escape the racial violence and segregation that plagued Kentucky. Similarly, many migrated to Louisville and other urban centers because of poor pay and exploitation as tenant farmers and sharecroppers in rural areas. Cities also provided some of the only public education open to African Americans in the state.

African Americans continued to migrate out of state during the Great Migration of the World War I years, and the second Great Migration of the 1930s and 40s. In 1860, Kentucky’s population was over 20 percent black, but by 1950 the percentage had dropped to just under 7 percent. However, the African American population of Louisville continued to grow. Between 1930 and 1970, over 17,000 black migrants moved to the city.

The staggering migration numbers in Kentucky demonstrate not only the racial challenges of living in rural Kentucky, but also the determination of African Americans to seek better economic and educational opportunities for their families. While voting was never officially denied to blacks in Kentucky after the Civil War, for over a century thousands of African Americans “voted with their feet” against racial violence, labor exploitation, and the lack of educational opportunities for their children.

See:

Adams, Luther. “‘Way Up North in Louisville’: African-American Migration in Louisville, Kentucky, 1930-1970.” PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2002.

Hogan, Roseann Reinemuth. *Kentucky Ancestry: A Guide to Genealogical and Historical Research*. Salt Lake City, UT: Ancestry Inc., 1992.

Painter, Nell Irvin. *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction*. NY: W.W. Norton, 1992.

Wright, George C. *A History of Blacks in Kentucky, Vol. 2: In Pursuit of Equality, 1890-1980*. Frankfort: Lexington Historical Society, 1992.