

Examining African American Migrations

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Oftentimes genealogists are faced with the perplexing movements of their ancestors. Long before the Great Migration of the early 20th century, African Americans were on the move. Finding an ancestor in a different location from one census to another always begs the question as to what prompted the movement. Equally significant is “not” finding an ancestor in a census year. On the surface, there is a 50% chance they relocated and the genealogist needs to figure out the most reasonable places of his/her removal. The circumstances surrounding movements are many and understanding them is an important part of family research. The migration of individuals and families in the direct and collateral lines of your family tree is a given. Renown sociologist Donald J. Bogue stated it clearly and simply when he said in his 1969 book, *Principles of Demography*, that “migration is a necessary element of normal population adjustment”.

MIGRATION CATEGORIES

Internal Migration. Moving to a new home within a state, country, or continent. Many of the initial movements of blacks after the Civil War fit into this category. Freedmen wanted to experience their newfound freedom by walking off the farm or plantation at will. Some sought to reunite their families residing on the land of one or more local white landholders. The more profound early movements of African Americans were from rural communities to nearby urban cities. This migration pattern played out once again in the first half of the 20th century in states across America as opportunities in small towns dwindled and the industrial growth in medium to large cities expanded rapidly.

External Migration. Moving to a new home in a different state, country, or continent. While scores of former slaves traveled to other states after the Civil War in search of family members, there were additional factors associated with movement of greater distances. The Freedmen’s Bureau, and other aid societies facilitated the relocation of many black families to locations primarily in the North. In later decades many business concerns, including coal mining, railroads, and manufacturing, engaged labor agents to heavily recruit workers from southern states.

Step Migration. A series of shorter, less extreme migrations from a person’s place of origin to final destination—such as moving from a farm, to a village, to a town, and finally to a city. Scholarly research bears out the fact that much of the migration occurring among African Americans was of this type. This could explain the failure to locate the marriage record of a single ancestor born in the rural Black Belt of Alabama who shows up years later married in Birmingham.

Chain Migration. A series of migrations within a family or defined group of people. This phenomenon was widespread and can often aid the genealogist in locating missing family members. Chain migrations to sizable cities can often be detected by city directories in the case of individual families or in the case of groups by the establishment of clubs with members from a specific hometown (and the subsequent publishing of their activities in a newspaper column).

Seasonal Migration. The process of moving for a period of time in response to labor or climate conditions. On the surface this may not seem applicable to black research, however a case in point would be recruitment, in conjunction with the National Urban League, of over 1,000 black college students from FL, NC, GA, and VA to work in the summer in the tobacco fields of Connecticut.

BLACK MIGRATION RESOURCES

National Geographic Xpeditions was a website containing lesson plans and other information pertaining to migration that seems to no longer exist. Thankfully you can now go to the Digital Chalkboard. There you will find a lesson plan with migration terminology, answers to the basic questions of why people migrate, and more in PDF format. Google *human migration guide (6-8)* for a direct link or click here: <https://tinyurl.com/yehaby7d>

The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations, by noted historian Ira Berlin chronicles the movement of African Americans beginning with the forcible deportation from Africa to America. An author interview can be found here: <https://tinyurl.com/BerlinC-Span>

Encyclopedia of the Great Black Migration, 3 volumes, edited by Steven A. Reich, contains entries on occupations, organizations, events (such as race riots), and more than 30 city profiles. This excellent reference resource is also available as an ABC-CLIO ebook so look for this format in libraries as well.

In Motion: The African American Migration Experience website of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture contains a very impressive multimedia collection of images, text and maps. Google *in motion aame* for a direct link or click here: <http://www.inmotionaame.org/home.cfm>

Black newspapers are an excellent source of migrations both large and small. For many researchers, this resource will be the one that solves your migration mystery. Community social columns provide the best source of information on individual/small group movements.

Oral histories, many of them produced in the 1970s, provide a great timeline of life in a particular community. Often the interviewee discusses the places they lived prior to their current place of residence, and it is common for them to detail the comings and goings of others as well.

Historical works: Books, Articles, Theses. Scholars and government workers have produced hundreds of thousands of pages capturing the life events of the members of thousands of African American communities of various sizes. It is in these materials where genealogists will uncover a great deal of information on the origins of many community members.

BEYOND THE WEBINAR

There are many other resources and possible avenues of discussion related to this fascinating topic. So use the contact information above to make queries, share experiences, and continue the discussion.

If you found one or more slides in this presentation of great interest and would like to have copies, contact me.

BIOGRAPHY

- ❖ Accomplished researcher, popular national speaker, and author of the book, “Finding and Using African American Newspapers”.
- ❖ Author of more than half a dozen articles, including “Using an Extended Research Project to Reconstruct a Community” which appeared in the Association for Professional Genealogists Quarterly, “Answers in African American Newspapers” written for Family Tree Magazine, and most recently “Religion and the African American Research Process” in NGS Magazine.
- ❖ Delivered historical papers at the Western Historical Association conference, Association for the Study of African American Life and History, Association for African American Historical Research and Preservation, and the Illinois History Conference.
- ❖ Instructor for over a decade in the **Researching African American Ancestors** track as part of the prestigious faculty at the summer Institute for Genealogy and Historical Research at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama (now at the University of Georgia in Athens). In 2013 was part of the inaugural Midwestern African American Genealogy Institute staff, teaching in the Pre and Post Emancipation Records track.
- ❖ Former board member of the Association of Professional Genealogists and Federation of Genealogical Societies, and longtime affiliation with/service to the Afro-American Genealogical and Historical Society of Chicago.