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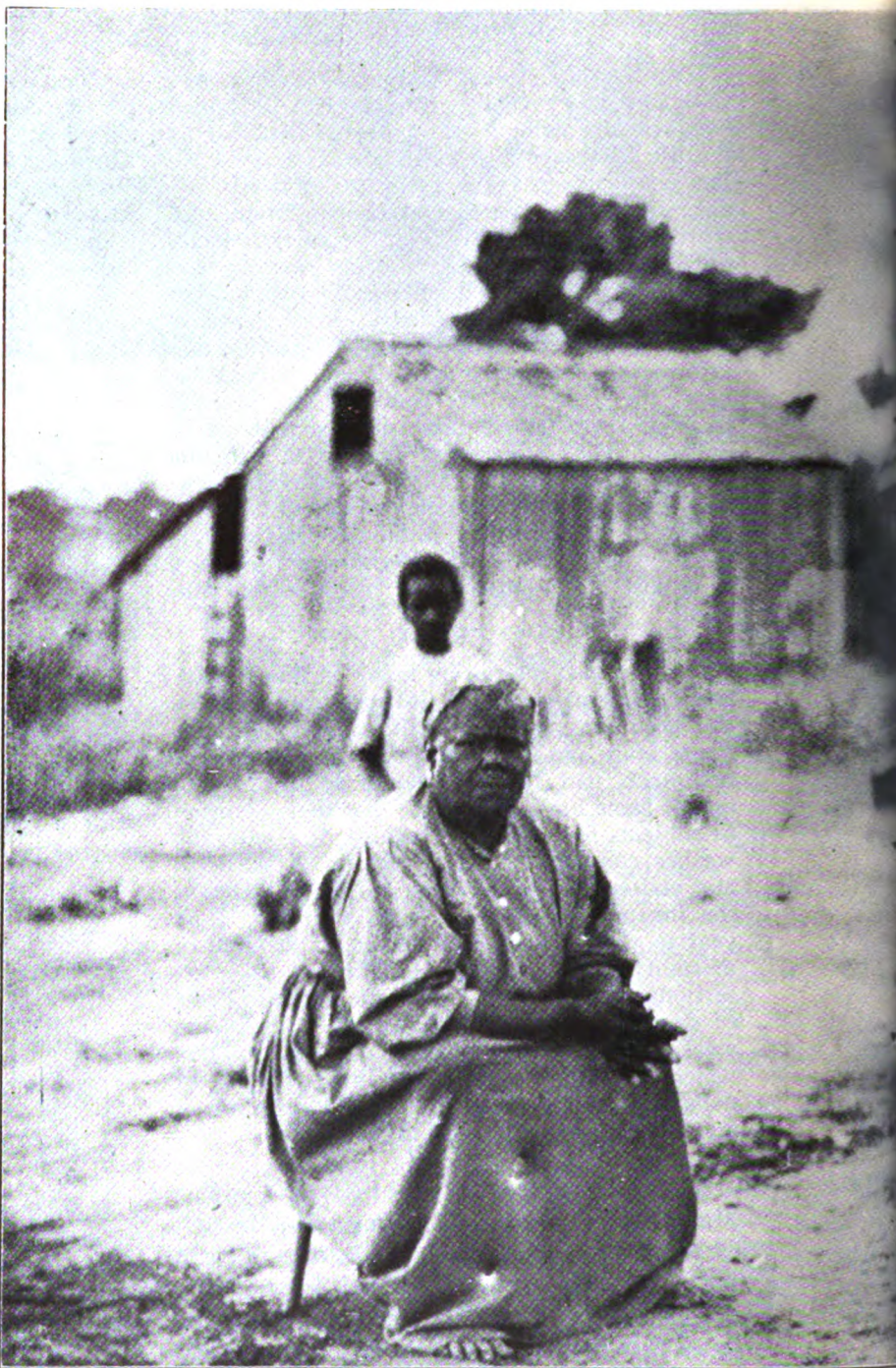
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How Much is the Migration a Flight from Persecution?

By Charles S. Johnson

Desire for more wages and more regular wages, for better social treatment, improved cultural surroundings; the hysteria of a mass movement; simple curiosity and desire for travel and adventure, and free railroad tickets, all have played their part in the divorcement of the southern Negro from the land of his birth.

Reasons are one thing; motives another. The former with all persons are likely to be merely a rationalization of behavior, while the latter usually play first role in inspiring the behavior. All Negroes (no more than all whites) are not uniformly sensitive to their social environment. And altho emphasis upon the pernicious nature of the social environment of southern Negroes should and doubtless will have the effect of improving it, such emphasis is apt to obscure what seem to be even more vital issues and more substantial elements of Negro character. After all, it means more that the Negroes who left the South were motivated more by the desire to improve their economic status than by fear of being man-handled by unfriendly whites. The one is a symptom of wholesome and substantial life purpose; the other, the symptom of a fugitive incourageous opportunism. Persecution plays its part—a considerable one. But when the whole of the migration of southern Negroes is considered, this part seems to be limited. It is indeed more likely that Negroes, like all others with a spark of ambition and self-interest, have been deserting

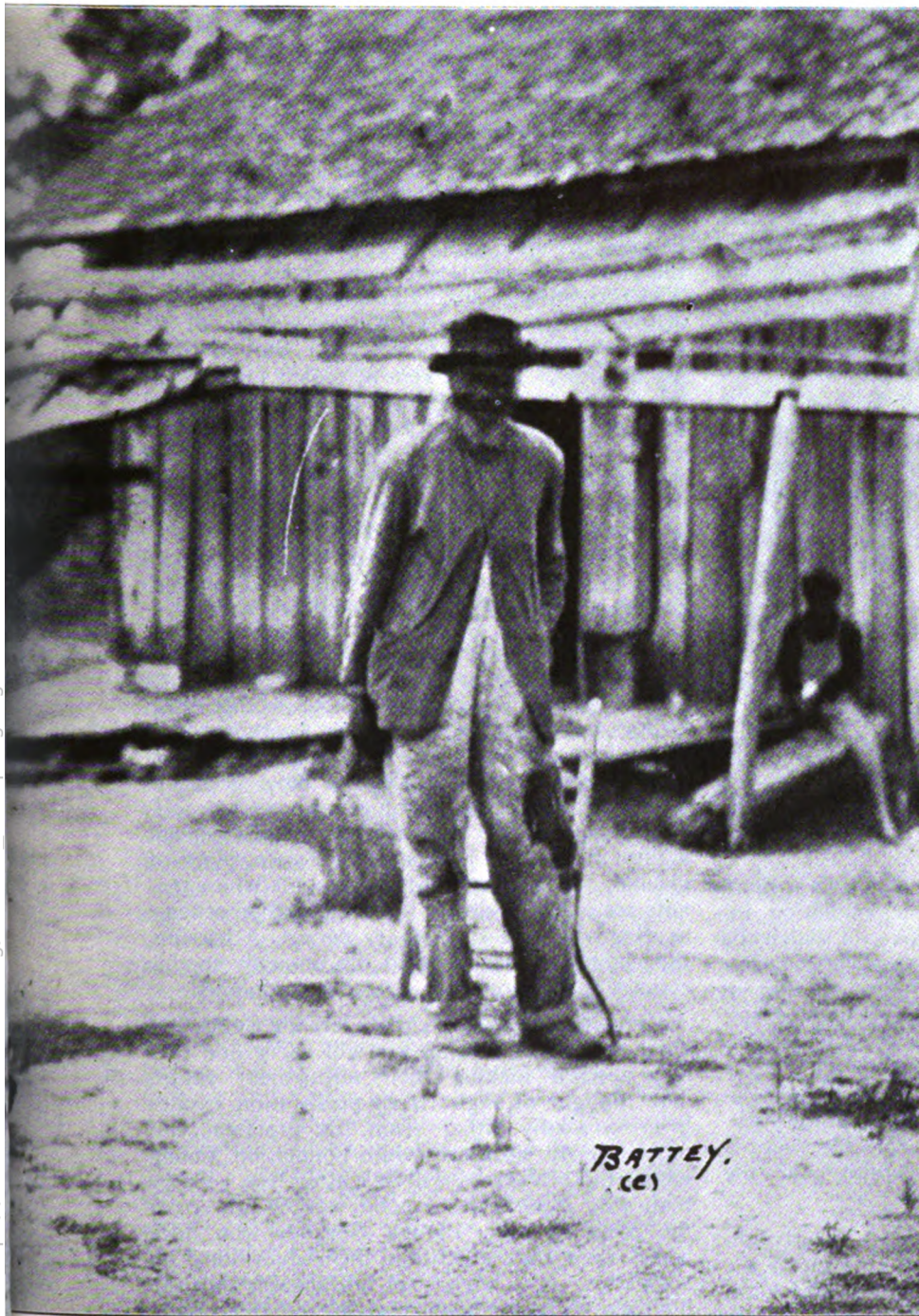


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soil which cannot yield returns in proportion to their population increase. The Census of 1920 indicated that the rate of Negro increase declined

from 18.0 for the decade 1890-1900, to 11.2 for the next, and to 6.5 for the last. This does not mean that fewer children are being born, for actually more Negro than white babies per fam-

ily are being born; (b) quest for more productive lands; (c) transplantation to industrial communities, practically all of which are in the North. During the past thirty years, 1890-1920, there



has been an increase in the rural population of 896,124 Negroes as compared with 2,078,331 for cities. The urban increase has been just about 100 per cent as rapid as the rural. In 1890, 19.8 per cent of the Negro population lived in cities; in 1920, this proportion grew to about 40 per cent. In the Southern States, between 1890-1900, the rural population increased 13.6 per cent, and between 1910 and 1920 it actually decreased 3.3 per cent. The Negro population increase in southern cities, considered as a whole, has been greater than the increase in the North, considered as a whole, despite the half-million added during the last decade. Here, of course, is the economic factor at work, hand in hand, with greater mobility, increased transportation, restlessness and the monotony and uncertainty of agricultural life ever against the allurements of the city.

The greatest inter-state movements of southern Negroes have been further South and West. In 1910, 52.3 per cent of the migration from Southern States was to the area west of the Mississippi; while in 1920, after the tremendous migration to the North, 42.9 per cent were living in the Southwestern States as compared with 42.2 per cent living in the North and West. For 130 years the center of the Negro population moved steadily some 478

miles toward the southwest—from Dinwiddie county, Va., to northern Alabama.

This shifting is further evident in the insta-

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ily are being born, but that more of them are dying. This desertion of the soil has taken three distinct directions: (a) urbanization—a species

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bility of Negro population in southern counties. Between 1900 and 1910, for example, 33.5 per cent of the counties increased rapidly, 31.1 increased at a rate above the average, while only 3.4 per cent showed an actual decrease, and 9.8 per cent an average increase equivalent to the total increase of the section. In 1879 there was a migration, similar to the one which we now experience, to Kansas. This followed a depression in 1878. Some 60,000 Negroes left. In 1888-1889, there was a similar movement to Arkansas, which carried 35,000 Negroes. Arkansas, for example, gained, between 1900-1910, 105,516 Negroes, the largest net gain of any state north or south; Oklahoma gained 85,062; and Texas, 19,821; while all the eastern, southern and central states suffered a loss. The counties of most rapid increase in the South between 1910 and 1920 were those south of the region of maximum Negro population density in 1910.

It is further significant here that the white populations have been showing in general outline the same trend of mobility as the Negroes. For example, their rate of mobility was 20 per cent as compared with 16 per cent for the Negroes and they also have left the counties deserted by Negroes, taking the same direction of migration.

Had persecution been the dominant and original stimulus, the direction of Negroes during the sixty years following emancipation would have been north instead of further south.

As a working test, a rough correlation was made between counties of the South in which lynchings had occurred during the thirty year period 1888-1918 and the migration from and to these counties.

Of ten Georgia counties, in which five or more lynchings occurred, the Negro population increased in five. Of the other five, in which the Negro population decreased, there was a corresponding decrease in the white population in three, and an increase in the other two considerably less than the average. To use one example,—in Montgomery County, in which five lynchings occurred, the Negro population decreased from 7,310 to 4,348 and the white population from 12,328 to 4,768. If this were a measure of persecution, the whites are the greater victims.

In Jasper County, Ga., there were nine lynchings, the largest number for any county of the state in thirty years. The Negro population actually increased in this county between 1890 to 1920, while the white population during 1900 and 1910 actually decreased.

Or to take the State of Texas. Of the six counties with five or more lynchings, the Negro population increased in four and decreased in two. Of the two in which there was a Negro decrease, there was a corresponding but more serious decrease in the white population. In Waller County, the Negro population decreased from 6,712 in 1910 to 4,967 in 1920; the white population decreased from 6,375 in 1900 to

5,426 in 1910 and to 4,082 in 1920. In Harrison County, with the largest number of lynchings (16), the Negro population showed a similar increase from 13,544 to 15,639.

In the State of Alabama, Jefferson County, with ten lynchings, increased from 90,617 in 1910 to 130,211 in 1920—the largest recorded increase in any county; Dallas County, with the largest number of lynchings (19), lost only 1,246 Negroes, while Sumter, with no lynchings at all, lost 3,491.

In spite of a considerable progress by Negroes, the great bulk of this population is in an almost hopeless struggle against feudalism. In four of the most congested Southern States: Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, containing 37,405,760 Negroes or over 36 per cent of all the Negroes in the country, 83.3 per cent of them are landless. The per cent of tenant farmers instead of changing over into owners actually increased in practically every Southern State during the past decade, while the per cent of owners decreased. Altho this was to some extent true of white farmers, the proportion among Negroes was just twice as great. The large plantation owners it seems are gradually taking over the land, thus reducing tenants, white and colored, to a state of unrelieved and helpless peasantry.

Cotton is a peculiar crop. Its nurture requires about seven times as many hands as other crops and only then for certain periods of the year. It does not yield readily to labor saving devices. It can be grown profitably only with cheap labor, and plenty of it, and Negroes have been the South's cheap labor. Immigrants are not welcomed because of their tendency and frequent ability in time to purchase their own plots of ground. As a matter of fact, small white tenants are not as desirable in the plantation scheme as Negroes; and if Negroes persist in leaving, the plantation system itself, an anomaly in this country and notoriously unstable, is doomed.

Knowing just why Negroes left the South and what they were looking for will carry one further toward making their adjustment easier. The thought of flight from persecution excites little sympathy either from the practical employer or the northern white population among whom these Negroes will hereafter live. Every man who runs is not a good worker and from the point of view of the Negroes who have come, they cannot sustain themselves long on sympathy. It is indeed not unthinkable that the high mortality so conspicuous in the abnormally reduced rate of Negro increase will be strikingly affected by the migration. The relief of overpopulation in certain counties of the South will undoubtedly give each Negro child born a better chance for survival, while, on the other hand, the presence of Negroes in cities exposes them to health education and sanitary regulations. The death rate of Negroes in northern cities, in spite of the fact that migrations there are principally of adults to whom death is more imminent, is not as great as in most of the Negro counties of the South.