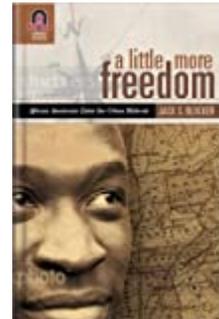




Jack S. Blocker. *A Little More Freedom: African Americans Enter the Urban Midwest, 1860-1930.* Urban Life and Urban Landscape Series. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008. 368 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-1067-3.



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Choosing Migration

In this copiously researched book, Jack S. Blocker uses quantitative history and elements of immigration and regional history to illuminate the roots of the Great Migration of African Americans out of southern states into the urban Lower Midwest, defined as Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. In doing so, he advances two arguments. He contends that racist violence, while significant, played a smaller role than economics and structural factors in African Americans's decisions to migrate and in their choices of destination. He also argues that prior to World War I African Americans did not migrate from the South directly to major metropolitan areas, but instead to "nonmetropolitan" areas, i.e., small cities and towns (p. 1). Thus, African Americans recapitulated the experience of "European Americans, whose metropolitan shift had occurred through stages encompassing a protracted period in small towns, an 'age of the village'" (p. 1). The first argument proves persuasive, the second less so.

According to Blocker, the first significant black migration into the Lower Midwest occurred during the Civil War, when twenty-one thousand came to Ohio, eleven

thousand to Indiana, and twenty thousand to Illinois, where the Union Army operated a huge "contraband" camp at Cairo. These refugees paved the way for a slow but steady Gilded Age migration of African Americans north from Kentucky and Tennessee. Blocker astutely links this migration to available transportation, noting that while travel by rail from Kentucky to the Lower Midwest was relatively easy, travel from the Deep South could take thirty hours and multiple changes. During the Gilded Age, black and white migrants chose the same rapidly growing midwestern cities, towns, and villages as destinations, indicating that their choices were based on economics. Thus, Oberlin, Ohio, an abolitionist stronghold with a good reputation when it came to race relations, drew few black migrants, but Cairo and Evansville, Illinois, drew many.

Blocker argues that African Americans sought economic opportunity in smaller midwestern cities and towns, areas he calls "nonmetropolitan." These towns tended to be located in the southern tier of the three states, relatively close to migrants' old homes in the Up-

per South. Linked to the Midwest's prosperous agricultural sector by trade, these towns offered more jobs for African American men than for women.

Having gotten his migrants to the Lower Midwest, Blocker then describes the worlds in which they lived. He begins on the local level with three case studies: Washington Court House and Springfield, Ohio; and Springfield, Illinois. A small market town, Washington Court House was home to 742 African Americans in 1890, 13 percent of the town's total population. Blocker argues that the equal ratio of men and women indicates that migrants came to Washington Court House as families. The community was not yet racially segregated, although the new suburbs then being built were white only. Black men held unskilled and semiskilled jobs, and women worked as domestics. Washington Court House offered little advancement for black workers. However, 48 percent of black heads of household in 1900 owned their homes, a percentage nearly equal to white home ownership in the town.

Springfield, Ohio, had a population of about 38,000 in 1890, of which 3,549 were black. Springfield had more single men living alone than Washington Court House did. The town's metalworking industries offered jobs to black men, albeit without much hope for advancement. Black women had better chances to find jobs in this larger town. On the one hand, fewer people of any race owned their homes, but the black home ownership rate was 23 percent to the white rate of 38 percent. On the other hand, as Blocker notes, people who persisted in the town, whether black or white, were more likely to own their own homes.

Springfield, Illinois, had proportionately fewer African Americans than the other two towns. Although it had a more diversified economy, that did not lead to greater opportunities for African Americans, who were employed mostly in semiskilled, unskilled, and (for women) domestic jobs. However, Abraham Lincoln's town was the most residentially segregated of the three, with black housing clustered in seven locations. A higher percentage of African Americans owned houses in Springfield, Illinois, than did in Springfield, Ohio, but less than in Washington Court House.

Through these case studies, Blocker demonstrates the "severely limited" job market facing black migrants (p. 81). As he points out, this is not news. However, Blocker's findings concerning home ownership are striking. In all three towns, persistence correlated highly with home ownership, but it seems to have been easier for

African Americans to buy houses in small towns than in small cities. The bigger the town, the harder to live the American dream of owning one's own home.

On the state level, African Americans in the Gilded Age could and did exert some political power, due to the precariously balanced nature of the two-party system in the Lower Midwest. Although the overwhelming majority of African American men voted Republican, Democrats in the Lower Midwest made concerted efforts to detach black voters from the GOP. In this competitive situation, it was possible for African Americans to participate actively in the political system, as voters and as officeholders.

After the Supreme Court struck down the Civil Rights Act in 1883, all threestates passed laws outlawing discrimination in public accommodations. In Ohio and Indiana, the legislatures were under Democratic control at the time. Ohio had more black voters than the other two states. According to Blocker, this set off a "bidding war" for black support, resulting in the repeal of laws providing for segregated schools and prohibiting interracial marriage, and the passage of laws prohibiting other forms of racially based discrimination (p. 86). Illinois's politicians were less committed to fighting legal inequality, but did support significant changes in state laws tending toward greater equality for African Americans. While Indiana had Reconstruction-era laws forbidding local schools from excluding black children, and passed an antilynching law in 1899, by the end of the century it was one of only two northern states prohibiting interracial marriage.

Despite this progressive record, state legislation had less impact on the lives of black migrants than local custom. Blocker's most telling examples concern education. Some communities "desegregated" schools by placing all black students in separate classrooms within white schools, and others never desegregated. Alton, Illinois, resegregated its schools in 1897 after twenty-five years of integration. Gilded Age black migrants resisted discrimination in education through the means available to them: public demonstrations, boycotts, the courts, and the political system. In the Alton school case, a black father took the system to court, resulting in a battle that lasted eleven years, "seven jury trials, and five state supreme court appeals" (p. 96). Although the plaintiff eventually won, Alton school authorities used technicalities to keep their schools segregated until the 1950s.

This regional overview, coupled with Blocker's detailed case studies, sets the stage for the most interesting

chapter in the book, "Violence: Patterns of Attack and Riposte." Between 1885 and 1910, according to Blocker, "antiblack collective violence in the Lower Midwest included twenty completed lynchings and at least six attempted lynchings, five nonfatal mob attacks, four fatal mob attacks, and five full-scale riots ... dispersed only by a significant military force" (p. 105). Blocker describes riots and lynchings throughout the Lower Midwest. Mobs of white immigrants attempted to drive black migrants out of the mining fields. Lynch mobs killed men accused of crimes ranging from rape to murder. In 1894, an attempt to lynch a man accused of raping a woman belonging to a locally prominent family in Washington Court House resulted in a full mob assault on the courthouse, which had to be defended by a state militia unit. In 1900, Akron had a race riot in which a white mob "dynamited and burned its own city hall in an attempt to kill a black prisoner," but was foiled by the Ohio National Guard (p. 119). In Evansville, a long and complicated sequence of events including a white riot and resistance by armed African Americans concluded with the town under martial law in July, 1903. In Springfield, Ohio, white mobs attacked black-owned saloons in 1904 and 1906. The 1908 race riot in Springfield, Illinois, is "the region's best known race riot before World War I," probably because a race riot in Lincoln's hometown pushes all the irony buttons (p. 128). It was also one of the most brutal.

In analyzing the factors leading to race riots, Blocker cites rivalry for jobs, white fears of black sexuality and/or black crime, an amorphous sense among whites that their town's black population was growing too large, revenge for specific crimes, and a general attempt to establish white supremacy at a time when African Americans were making economic progress and asserting their political and legal rights. As he notes, collective antiblack actions seem overdetermined, as "the factors cited could well have existed generally throughout the region" (p. 123). Yet "antiblack collective violence flared only in some, indeed, in a minority of communities" (p. 123). Those communities tended to have relatively large African American communities, but not all towns with large black populations had riots: "violence required the coming together imprecise though varying combinations of a variety of favorable conditions and propelling forces" (p. 124).

In their reaction to antiblack collective violence, African Americans in the Midwest demonstrated that they did indeed have a little more freedom than they might have had in the South. Black newspapers crusaded against mob rule, as did black self-help groups ranging

from Sunday school conferences to women's clubs. Most strikingly, African Americans armed themselves for collective self-defense. Blocker found that African American oral histories of the Springfield, Illinois, riot featured tales of "agency rather than victimization" (p. 133). For example, grocer Edward White, armed with guns and ammunition sent to him by relatives in Chicago, marched from his store to his house "all day and all night long, he had a gun on each shoulder ... and when they saw him with all his guns, they turned and went the other way" (p. 133).

Blocker provides additional fascinating information concerning mob violence. In the Midwest and the South, African American agency included more than resistance to lynch mobs. On occasion, African Americans actually participated in lynch mobs, as the case of an Ohio mob that hanged a black man accused of assaulting a respectable sixty-five-year-old African American widow. Nor were African Americans the only mob victims. In the Midwest, twenty-nine African Americans and twenty-six whites were lynched between 1889 and 1918.

African American migration to the Lower Midwest began to pick up pace in the 1890s, swelling into the phenomenon known as the Great Migration in 1915. Black southerners who wanted to move to cities chose the Midwest rather than the South for economic reasons: cities close to them in Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama had fewer, poorer jobs than cities across the Ohio River. When African Americans did move to southern cities, they often became jumping-off places for migration north. As Blocker puts it, "A narrow path led to Memphis and Nashville, but a broad highway beckoned to Chicago, Indianapolis, Dayton, Toledo and Cleveland" (p. 143). Although he is speaking in socio-economic metaphor, in fact transportation innovations created "broad highways" for black migration out of the South. By 1930 migrants could travel from Mississippi to Chicago by rail in eighteen hours.

While not discounting the "push" of southern white antiblack collective violence as a factor influencing black migration to the North, Blocker emphasizes the economic "pull" of better jobs and a developing, attractive black urban culture in bringing southern blacks to northern cities. However, northern white violence led African Americans to choose one city over another. During the Progressive Era, people in Ohio and Indiana, whether black or white, migrant or southern, tended to move from rural areas to urban areas, but African Americans skipped the small cities and moved directly to the largest.

Blocker says that in Ohio all the towns and cities that had experienced lynchings or riots experienced shrinkage in their share of the state's black population—but so did towns with the same socioeconomic characteristics where nothing overtly bad had taken place. African Americans moved to places with black populations large enough to offer some protection. Thus, Akron, with its booming industrial economy, pulled white migrants but repelled African Americans because of its violent history and its small black population, 451 in 1890. Dayton had jobs and a black community four times bigger.

In Illinois, however, African Americans and whites tended to choose the same industrializing cities, and African Americans did not vault over smaller cities to go directly to Chicago. As Blocker notes, Chicago had a large black community, a vibrant culture, and black institutions ranging from churches to hospitals and banks. However, Chicago also had a bad reputation for mob action against African Americans during strikes in 1899, 1900, 1904, and 1905. Blocker points out that academics may distinguish between mobs attacking African Americans over jobs and mobs attacking African Americans over race, but it probably made little difference in terms of the city's reputation among black migrants. Chicago did not begin to outdraw other Illinois industrial cities until the Great Migration.

The trickle of black migrants out of the South became a flood in 1915, and continued through the 1920s. At this point, black migrants could make choices on where to go based on many different factors: information about destinations from previous migrants; newspaper stories from the Midwest's multiple black papers; the pull of good jobs; aversion to communities with bad names, racially speaking; and the yen to be in a place where things were happening. While the choices made create a collective pattern, Blocker notes that the people involved made them individually, based on their own experiences and desires. Thus, black midwesterners sometimes stayed in small towns, even those with bad reputations, because they just did not like living in the big city, whereas other young people moved to Chicago for the same reason young whites did: bright lights, big city.

Blocker concludes that African Americans' movement north was "for the most part a deliberate and orderly one" (p. 219). As he notes, this contrasts with the more dramatic view of African Americans in "headlong flight from southern oppression" (p. 219). It also contradicts James W. Loewen's recent work on "sundown towns" (*Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of Amer-*

ican Racism [2005]), which describes African Americans being driven out of small towns in the North and finding refuge in cities. Blocker prefers to emphasize black agency and to place African Americans well within the "picture painted by modern historians of human mobility" (p. 219). That is, "migration responded to identifiable disappointments, dangers, and opportunities" (p. 219).

I find unpersuasive Blocker's contention that African Americans, like whites, experienced an "age of the village," a sojourn in small towns and smaller cities before moving to metropolitan areas. The African American migrants who moved from Kentucky to Washington Court House in the 1870s are not the same people who moved from Mississippi to Chicago in the 1920s. To subsume all these different people moving at different times into one group called "African American migrants" does not facilitate our understanding of the migration process. Moreover, as a rural historian, I am dubious about lumping small towns of six thousand and small cities of thirty thousand together, much less calling them villages. As a historian of the South, I was surprised at the concept that European Americans (Blocker's preferred term) passed through stages from rural to village to urban life. This was not the experience of most white southerners in the twentieth century, who, like their black neighbors, often moved directly from farm to industrial city (or, in the postwar South, to metropolitan suburb) without ever living in villages, or even small towns. Blocker effectively shows that black migrants moved to small towns and cities in the Midwest in the post-Civil War period, that they and new migrants from the South moved from place to place in search of safety and better jobs, and that by the time of the Great Migration this search led black migrants to the region's metropolitan areas. That is an achievement in itself.

However, this book's major contribution lies in the way that Blocker contextualizes the Great Migration. He provides ample evidence supporting his contention that African Americans, while responsive to the danger of anti-black collective action, made migration choices based primarily on economics plus structural factors. The word "nuanced" is overused in academic reviews, but if any book deserves it, this one does. *A Little More Freedom* is also old-school in its use of quantitative history, reminding me of the required readings when I was in graduate school in the 1980s—which was, according to Blocker, about the time he became interested in this project. I applaud his persistence, which has produced an impressive piece of work.

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