1

The Great Migration in New England

They came from places like Morven, North Carolina; Birmingham, Alabama; Quitman, Mississippi; and Sun, Louisiana. They left cities, small towns, and rural areas. They traveled by train, bus, and automobile. They fled racism, limited opportunity, and hopelessness. They moved north in pursuit of better jobs, equal treatment, and the promise of greater freedom.

One sought to escape the memory of being raped by her employer. Another was tired of harassment by police. A third refused to work as a domestic. One feared he would have died a violent death if he had remained in the land of his birth. Others moved for comparatively mundane reasons: like migrants throughout history, they sought to improve their lives.

Most came alone. Some came as part of married couples. A few brought children. They knew not what they would find. They hoped only that it would be better than what they left behind.

They were but a few of tens of thousands of Black people who migrated to Boston from the American South in the twentieth century. They were part of the Great Migration, which transformed urban areas nationwide, including Boston and other cities in New England.

Between World War I and 1980, more than six million Black people left the South and moved to urban areas in the North and West.[1] The Black population of northern cities grew tremendously as a result. Detroit's Black population increased 1,300 percent, New York City added 1.7 million Black residents, and Black people came to make up nearly 40 percent of Chicago's population.[2] The Black exodus from the South dramatically altered the geography of Black America. In 1910, nearly nine out of every ten Black people lived in the rural South, a legacy of slavery and emancipation, which gave them their freedom but little else. By 1980, nearly half of Black people in the United States lived outside the South, most of them in cities.[3]

Much has been written about the Great Migration and its impact on cities such as Chicago and Detroit, but almost nothing has been written about its history in Boston and New England. Books and articles about the Great Migration rarely mention Boston or cities such as Hartford that also saw

North to Boston. Blake Gumprecht, Oxford University Press. © Blake Gumprecht 2023.
DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197614440.003.0001

significant Black migration from the South. Contemporary authors writing about New England have largely ignored the subject.[4] A few scholars have written about the migration of Black southerners to Connecticut, but most of their work has been published in journals and books with limited reach.[5] Research about Black Boston rarely mentions the Great Migration, except in passing, and underplays its significance.

New England has likely received less attention than other areas because fewer Black southerners moved to the region than elsewhere, but the volume of Black migration from the South was still sizable and its impact was great. Significant Black migration to New England from the South began earlier than elsewhere. The Black population in the region nearly doubled between the end of the Civil War and 1900. New England added another 750,000 Black people in the twentieth century. Not all that growth was the result of migration from the South—the region has also attracted many Black migrants from the Caribbean and Africa—but it was the most important factor.[6]

By 1980, when Black southern migration slowed, one-third of US-born Black people living in New England had been born in the South. The number of southern-born Black people increased from fewer than 5,000 before the Civil War to more than 144,000.[7] An even greater number of Black people living in New England today are the children or grandchildren of southern migrants, so statistics on the number of Black people born in the South understate the impact of the Great Migration. The descendants of migrants carry forward the culture and lifestyles their parents and grandparents brought from the South, magnifying their influence on Black life in the region.

Black migration from the South was greatest during and after World War II, just as it was nationally. Many historians divide the Great Migration into two parts, separated by the Great Depression of the 1930s, which discouraged people from moving because conditions were bad everywhere. World War II inspired Black people once again to leave the South. The war created job opportunities as northern industries expanded production to supply the war effort. The war also caused labor shortages, because many US workers joined the military, and fighting overseas largely halted immigration from Europe.

The number of southern-born Black people in New England increased 72 percent during the 1940s, more than in any other decade of the twentieth century. The volume of migration grew after the war, as earlier migrants

encouraged family members and friends to join them. Between 1950 and 1980, the number of southern-born Black people living in the region nearly tripled.[8] Nearly every major city in southern New England was transformed by Black migration. Between 1860 and 1980, Boston's Black population grew by nearly 125,000 people. Hartford in 1910 was home to fewer than 2,000 Black residents, but the Connecticut capital added 44,000 Black people by the end of the Great Migration. Black residents now make up at least one-quarter of the population in five large New England cities—Boston, Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, and Springfield.[9]

Migration and the growth of Black populations changed the region's cities in a variety of ways. Black neighborhoods expanded to meet the newcomers' housing needs. Black-owned businesses proliferated. Black churches increased in number and variety. Black culture flourished and Black social organizations were established. Black people fought to gain greater political clout and Black issues became central to political debates.

Why did urban areas in New England receive fewer Black migrants from the South than other northern cities? Some have suggested that White New Englanders actively worked to keep Black people out, but the true reason probably has more to do with geography.[10] In 1940, the sociologist Albert Stouffer proposed a theory of "intervening opportunities" to help explain why migrants choose one destination over others. Stouffer argued that migrants are less likely to move to a place if they encounter an intervening opportunity on the way to that place. In other words, most migrants will stop at the first destination that provides whatever they are seeking.[11] New England urban areas were at a disadvantage in attracting southern migrants because Black people traveling north along the Atlantic Seaboard encountered several large cities—Washington, then Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York—before they would reach New England. Many migrants chose to stop in one of those urban areas rather than continuing northward.

More Black southern migrants moved to Connecticut than any other New England state, which demonstrates the validity of Stouffer's theory. By 1980, there were more than 76,000 southern-born Black residents in Connecticut. Relatively few Black southerners migrated to the largest cities in the three northernmost New England states.[12] Within New England, Boston was somewhat of an exception to that pattern because it is the largest urban area in the region and thus provides greater opportunities than smaller cities. Its pull was stronger than midsize cities such as Hartford or New Haven farther south.

This book focuses on Black migration to the city of Boston because it is the largest urban area in New England, because it contains the greatest concentration of Black residents and attracted more Black migrants than any other city in the region, and because little has been written about the twentieth-century migration of Black southerners to the city. Other cities in the Boston area, such as Cambridge, also received many Black migrants, but they won't be examined here.

Following a short history of Black migration to Boston from the South, this book will take an unconventional approach. I will tell the story of the Great Migration through the life histories of ten people who came to Boston from the South between 1943 and 1969 (the dates in the chapter titles are the years of their migration). Each of those individuals will be the subject of one chapter. The chapters are written as short biographies that tell the story of each person from birth to the present.

Some may ask whether these ten people are representative of the many Black southerners who moved to Boston. In statistical terms, they probably are not. All did reasonably well. They were employed as teachers, factory workers, welders, security guards, salespeople, and civil servants. None achieved fame or fortune. They are regular folk, who have lived largely private lives, experiencing triumphs but also difficulties. They came from six southern states. Most followed family members to Boston. They share one characteristic other than their southern roots: they have all belonged to the same church, Charles Street African Methodist Episcopal Church in Roxbury. That reflects the way connections were made. The individuals featured were not chosen in any strategic way based on a desired set of characteristics. I did not want to manipulate the book's message in that way.

Charles Street AME is the one of the oldest Black churches in Boston. Originally named the First African Methodist Episcopal Church, it was organized on the north slope of Beacon Hill in 1818. Its first permanent home was on Anderson Street, a short walk from the Massachusetts State House. In the lead-up to the Civil War, the church was the frequent site for abolitionist meetings and rallies led by antislavery activists such as William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Sojourner Truth. It led local opposition to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law and was a stop on the Underground Railroad. After the war, the church grew too large for its original building and in 1876 relocated a few blocks away to Charles Street, adopting its present name. It remained there until 1939, when it moved to its current home on Warren Street in Roxbury. By then, Boston's Black population had shifted away from

Beacon Hill and few of its members still lived in the area. It was the last Black institution to leave Beacon Hill.[13]

Although the people featured in these pages have belonged to one church, their stories are illustrative of the experiences of Black people everywhere who left the South. We learn what their lives were like before they moved north. We discover the factors that motivated them to migrate to Boston and come to appreciate how important family connections were in influencing their decisions. We follow their lives after they arrived in Boston, became settled, had families, and moved from short-term jobs into long-term careers. We learn why most chose to remain in Boston's Black community even when they had the means to live elsewhere. We hear about their encounters with racism in Boston, conditions they hoped they'd left behind in the South. We see the adjustments they have made, whether their hopes were fulfilled, and how their lives were changed by their moves. Their stories are invaluable for understanding the Great Migration.

The life histories in this book are based primarily on my interviews with the people who are featured. I interviewed most of my subjects three or more times between 2015 and 2021. Because none have been public figures, there are few other sources for reconstructing their lives, though I have occasionally talked to family and friends. I chose to rely on the migrants themselves because they know their lives better than anyone else. I recognize that memory can be faulty, particularly when it extends over seven or eight decades. In addition, we all shape the stories we tell about ourselves to present the view that we prefer and sometimes leave out details that are contrary to that perspective. Nevertheless, I believe that the people featured were honest in telling me about their lives.

The story of migration is the story of people—individuals who risk everything in hopes of finding a better life. The best way to tell that story, in my view, is through the lives of the migrants themselves. I have chosen to let those stories stand alone because they showcase how the Great Migration affected ordinary people. Devoting each chapter to one person enables us to more clearly hear the voices of the people featured than would be possible if their stories were integrated with others in a more conventional narrative. Seeing their lives whole also enables us to better appreciate the long-term impacts of migration.

The written record favors those who have led unusual and extraordinary lives. Ordinary people are rarely written about and seldom document their own experiences, so that our body of knowledge is incomplete and one-sided,

and presents a distorted view of reality. Everybody's life is different. Everyone has a story to tell. Each of those stories is worth telling because they help us better understand the human experience. The stories of individual lives, even if unexceptional, are compelling if told creatively.

This is the first book, or serious research of any kind, about the Great Migration's impacts on Boston. It expands our knowledge of the subject beyond the cities that have been the focus of previous research. It reveals a hidden aspect of the city's history and shines a spotlight on a singularly important event in the making of Black Boston, yet one that is unknown to many of the city's residents, or underappreciated. It also amplifies the voices of ordinary Black Bostonians, whose voices are seldom heard in the public sphere.

Although most historians date the beginning of the Great Migration to the years of World War I, substantial movement of Black people to Boston from the South began earlier than that, likely owing to the city's reputation as a center for the abolitionist movement and its history as a sanctuary for people who fled slavery.

The first Black people in Boston were brought there as slaves during the colonial era, perhaps as early as 1624, but certainly by 1638. It was not until 1783 that slavery was abolished in Massachusetts, when the state Supreme Court ruled in favor of an enslaved person who sued for his freedom. Boston did not attract many Black people before the Civil War, probably because it was not a major stop on the Underground Railroad and offered a limited range of jobs for them. The city's Black population grew slowly in the first part of the nineteenth century. Boston had fewer than twenty-three hundred Black residents in 1860, not counting escaped slaves who avoided census takers.[14]

Before the Civil War, most Black people in Boston were employed as servants and lived on the north side of Beacon Hill, then considered part of the West End, near the homes of the wealthy White families where they worked. White people called the area "Nigger Hill." This grew to be the largest area of Black settlement because it was also convenient to the food markets of Faneuil Hall and nearby docks, where many Black laborers worked. Black residences were concentrated near Joy and Phillips Streets. Many Black people lived in ramshackle wooden houses, which were described as "the most miserable huts in the city." Cambridge Street on Beacon Hill was lined with businesses catering to the Black population. Even after Black residents

began leaving the area, a Boston newspaper in 1904 observed that the street "looks most like a business thoroughfare in a southern city. Out of every ten people you pass . . . about eight of them are Black."[15]

The movement of Black people to Boston increased dramatically after the emancipation of slaves and the end of the Civil War. The number of Black people living in Boston more than doubled from 1860 to 1880, and doubled again by 1900. Most of that growth was due to migration from the South. Writing in 1914, the sociologist and settlement house worker John Daniels observed that Boston experienced "a veritable tidal wave" of migration by Black southerners following the war. The city added nearly ten thousand Black residents in the last four decades of the nineteenth century. That number may not seem large, but it was relative to the size of the Black population before the war. As migration grew, the share of Black residents who had born in the South rose dramatically, from 29 percent in 1860 to 59 percent in 1900.[16]

Some of those migrants came as part of organized efforts to resettle ex-slaves in the North. The Freedmen's Bureau, a federal government agency, transported 1,083 ex-slaves from the South to the Boston area in two years. During one two-week period in 1870, a Boston employer of cooks, maids, and other servants brought 250 Black people from Richmond, Virginia, to the city.[17]

Most Black people who migrated to Boston came initially from the upper South, traveling to New England on coastal ships or later by train on the Seaboard Air Line and railroads that formed the Atlantic Coast Line. In 1900, 50 percent of Black southerners in Boston had been born in Virginia; 23 percent were born in North Carolina. Most Black southern migrants to Boston came not from farms and rural areas, but from cities. The historian Elizabeth Hafkin Pleck found that two-thirds of Black Virginians who married in Boston in the 1890s came from Richmond and other cities in that state.[18]

Boston was far ahead of the South and most other cities in its treatment of Black people. Massachusetts in 1783 granted taxpaying Black men the right to vote, and in 1839 it repealed laws against interracial marriage, legalizing a process already practiced. In 1855, Boston abolished its segregated schools after a long boycott by Black families. A decade later Massachusetts outlawed discrimination against Black people in public places. A year after that, two Black men from Boston were elected to the Massachusetts legislature, among the first Black people elected to any state legislature. In the 1870s, a Black

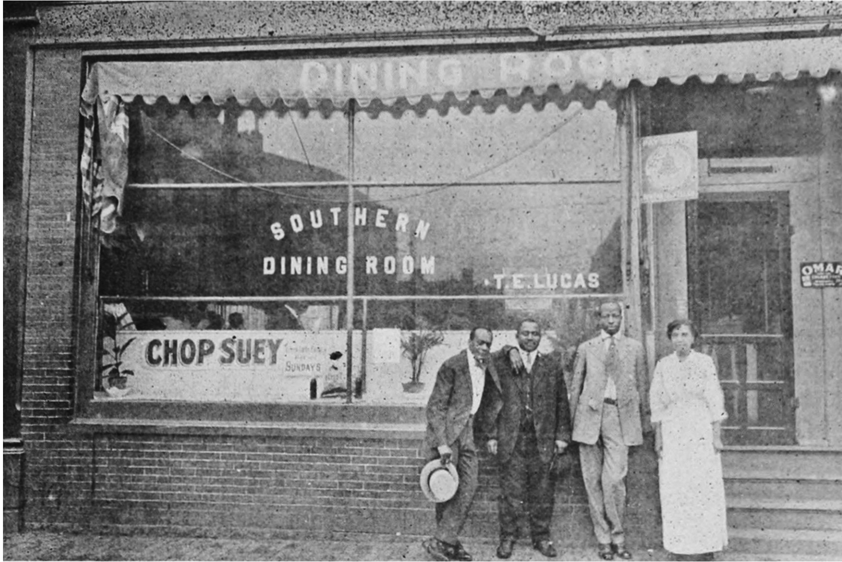
physician was elected to the Boston School Committee and a Black barber won a seat on the Boston Common Council. Boston hired its first Black schoolteacher in 1890.[19]

The *Boston Sunday Herald* called the city "a paradise for Negroes" in a 1904 article that took up one full page in the newspaper. Such an article might be easily dismissed as local boosterism and was almost certainly penned by a White writer. But one of the first American magazines devoted to Black culture, the *Colored American Magazine*, founded in Boston in 1900, reprinted the article and disseminated its message to a national audience. William H. Lewis, who migrated to Massachusetts from Virginia for college, later graduated from Harvard Law School, and became the first Black US assistant attorney general, told the article's author, "Here in Boston the Negro enjoys without a doubt greater liberty than anywhere else in the country."[20]

As migration from the South intensified, Black residents began to leave Beacon Hill, pushed out by deteriorating housing and rising rents. Most of the southern migrants who arrived after the Civil War settled initially in the South End, which was convenient to the railroads and hotels where many of them worked. Three Black churches developed in the area, two of them moving there from Beacon Hill. Ebenezer Baptist, founded in 1871 by formerly enslaved people from Virginia, became the only church composed almost exclusively of Black southern migrants. By 1880, two-thirds of all southern-born Black people in Boston lived in the South End. The Black population on Beacon Hill gradually disappeared.[21]

Black southern migrants then spread into adjacent lower Roxbury, the flow increasing dramatically after the turn of the century. By 1910, more than five thousand Black people lived in one ward in lower Roxbury, nearly 40 percent of all Black people in the city. The South End and lower Roxbury were diverse neighborhoods at the time. Both had long been receiving areas for immigrants, and about one-third of residents were foreign born. Irish immigrants and their children were most numerous, followed by English-speaking Canadians and Russian Jews. Black residents lived on the same streets and often in the same buildings with White residents. Black children attended integrated schools. At the turn of the century, the Franklin School in the South End had 200 Irish, 170 "American," 121 Jewish, and 61 "colored" students, plus 124 of other nationalities.[22]

Tremont Street in lower Roxbury became the hub of Black business activity in the early 1900s. In one three-block stretch, there was a Black hotel, a Black bank, a Black undertaker, a Black-owned pharmacy, a Black beauty school,



Thomas Lucas, a Black migrant from Virginia, operated the Southern Dining Room restaurant on Tremont Street in lower Roxbury in the early 1900s. The street became a hub of Black business activity. Reproduced from National Negro Business League convention program, 1915.

a Black-run print shop, and other businesses catering to Black people. The Melbourne Hotel was one of three Black hotels in the city. The Eureka Co-Operative Bank, started in 1910, advertised that it was "the only bank in the East owned and operated by Colored People." The Southern Dining Room, operated by Thomas Lucas, a Black migrant from Virginia, promoted itself as "cool, clean, commodious." The B. F. Stark grocery sold "Southern Products."[23]

The rapid increase of Boston's Black population nurtured Black community development. By 1900, there were 197 Black-owned businesses in the city. Black churches increased in number and size. Southern migrants made up more than half the membership at four Black churches. One Black church, Calvary Baptist, tripled its membership in seven years. Six Black women formed the Harriet Tubman House in the South End to "assist working girls" from the South. In 1901, William Monroe Trotter launched the *Boston Guardian*, which became an influential Black weekly newspaper.[24]

Such information suggests that life for Boston's Black residents was better than it was. The *Herald* article said that the city offered Black people "the

same political, civil and educational privileges which it offers to the White man," but that was an overstatement.[25] Black people in Boston were not treated equally by most measures. Furthermore, as the abolitionist spirit in Boston faded and Jim Crow swept over the country, the treatment of Black people in the city deteriorated. Boston's largest immigrant group, the Irish, resented the Black migrants because they competed directly with them for jobs. Irish contempt for Black people has bedeviled race relations in Boston to the present day, though certainly not all Irish are racist and not all racists in the city are Irish.[26]

Black workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were shut out of better-paying occupations, most worked in menial jobs, and they showed little improvement in economic status for decades. They were often paid less than White laborers for the same work. Few Black residents were able to buy their own homes and they were largely restricted to a few neighborhoods by housing discrimination. The areas where most Black people lived were unhealthy slums. In 1900, Black children were nearly twice as likely as those of Irish immigrants to die before they reached their first birthday.[27]

White people in positions of power, meanwhile, sought to reduce the political influence of the growing Black population. In 1895, the city of Boston redrew its election districts, dividing the Black population and making it more difficult for Black people to be elected. Fewer Black candidates won election to city positions as a result, and not a single Black person was elected to the Boston City Council between 1908 and 1949. Black people also stopped winning election to the Massachusetts legislature. Between 1902 and 1947, not a single Black candidate was elected to the state senate or house of representatives.[28]

"The North is not all it was supposed to be," wrote the sociologist John Daniels.[29] Scholars agree that prejudice against Black people in Boston grew beginning in the late nineteenth century. There was a dramatic increase in residential segregation. The rate of interracial marriage, which had once been comparatively high in the city, declined significantly. Hotels, restaurants, and candy stores stopped serving Black customers, though they came up with false reasons for doing that. Even churches stopped welcoming Black worshipers. The most serious discrimination came in employment, and one observer suggested that better jobs were open to Black workers in the South than in Boston. Remarkably, some Black business owners refused to hire Black workers for fear of losing their White customers. "The color line

is drawn in Boston—silently and courteously," wrote *Zion's Herald*, "but positively and rigorously."[30]

Some blamed the southern migrants for altering White attitudes. The newcomers were different from northern-born Black people, some of whom had lived in Boston for decades. They lived differently. They acted differently. They talked differently. Whites reacted negatively to those differences. "Most of them were utterly uneducated," Daniels wrote. "Nearly all of them were more or less uncouth, many were ragged and dirty, and a large proportion were crude, dull, and indeed brutish in appearance." Faced with the "black horde," he said, White residents "recoiled." Daniels was a White sociologist, paternalistic and racist, but the Black minister J. M. Henderson, pastor of Charles Street AME, also decried the negative impact of the migrants on Boston's Black community. Describing southern migrants as "the lower type," he said they were causing trouble by "making noise" about discrimination in the city. "Had no colored people from the outside come to New England," he said, "there would be no disquietude here."[31]

As Henderson's comments suggest, the movement of Black southerners to Boston also created divisions within the city's Black community. Those divides have persisted to the present. Northern-born Black residents, some of whom traced their New England roots to the colonial era, often looked down on the migrants. The most successful among them were nicknamed the Black Brahmins, after Boston's wealthy English elite. Northern-born Black residents lived apart from southern migrants. They were better educated. They dressed differently and had a different demeanor. Many had relatively light skin. They mimicked White behavior and often attended White churches. They spoke like New Englanders.

W. E. B. Du Bois, the leading Black intellectual of the era, was born and raised in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in the western part of the state, and became the first Black person to earn a doctorate at Harvard University. He wrote that in northern cities there were "two classes of people, the descendants of Northern free negroes and the freed immigrants from the South." He called southern migrants "largely ignorant and unused to city life" and said they posed the "gravest" danger to Black society in northern cities. He wrote that the "influx of low characters" in Boston "made the problem of home life among the better class of negroes . . . difficult."[32]

The migration of Black southerners to Boston slowed after 1900, even though conditions for Black people worsened across the South after Reconstruction collapsed, Black voters were disenfranchised, Jim Crow

laws were enacted throughout the region, and violence against Black people increased. World War I stimulated an unprecedented wave of Black migration from the South, which is why most historians designate that time as the beginning of the Great Migration. But the new surge largely bypassed Boston.

Nearly a half million Black people fled the South for northern cities during the 1910s. Multiple factors created labor shortages in northern industries during the war years and inspired employers to send recruiters to the South to entice Black people to come north. Expanded wartime production created new jobs, many White workers had joined the military, and the war halted immigration.[33] The Black population of many northern cities grew rapidly during the war years. Detroit's Black community grew the fastest: from 1910 to 1920, the number of southern-born Black people in the city grew tenfold. Chicago's Black population more than doubled, and New York City gained more than sixty thousand Black residents.[34]

Boston's Black population, in contrast, grew modestly in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the city adding fewer than five thousand Black residents. From 1910 to 1920, the number of southern-born Black people living in Boston actually declined. Some of the Black newcomers were immigrants who came from islands in the English-speaking Caribbean, especially Barbados, Jamaica, and Montserrat, adding a third element to Boston's Black community. Although Boston had a small West Indian community dating to the late nineteenth century, West Indian immigration grew on the eve World War I, when the Boston-based United Fruit Co. began offering passenger service on ships from islands where it owned or managed fruit plantations.[35]

Boston's declining number of Black southerners does not mean, however, that migration to the city from the South stopped. A more likely explanation is that the city had fewer southern-born Black residents because earlier migrants had died, and some migrants had left the city. The loss of Black migrants was likely greater than the number of new arrivals.

There is no precise way to measure the volume of Black southern migration because the US government does not keep statistics about internal migrants in the same way that it counts immigrants. One way to measure Black migration is to calculate the difference between the number of Black people born in the South, as measured in the decennial census, from one census year to the next. But such a calculation undercounts actual migration because in any decade some earlier migrants die, while others leave. Migration experts

have devised methods to approximate migration flows using data on all three subjects, but they are imperfect measures.[36]

Unlike Boston, other New England cities experienced significant Black migration from the South during World War I. Hartford's Black population more than doubled from 1910 to 1920. Many Black people who moved to Connecticut came initially to work on tobacco farms near Hartford, and then relocated to the city when they grew dissatisfied with farm work. Connecticut tobacco growers joined with the National Urban League to recruit Black college students in the South to work temporarily in tobacco fields during summer months. They included future civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. But tobacco farmers also sent recruiters to the South to obtain permanent workers. More than three thousand Black southerners came to the Hartford area in a single year. Most of the new migrants were from Georgia.[37]

Why didn't Boston attract many Black migrants during World War I? Writing in 1920, Emmett Scott said that the city "has not . . . at any time afforded any great variety of occupations for the peasant class of negro." He observed that, while there were industries in Boston that added workers during the war, "barriers prevented negroes in large numbers from entering them." He didn't explain what those barriers were.[38] Perhaps word had spread that Boston was not as tolerant as its image suggested, which may have discouraged Black people from migrating to the city. Studying census returns from 1880 and 1900, the historian Pleck found that few southern-born Black males who lived in Boston in 1880 remained in the city twenty years later. Four out of five had either left Boston or died, which suggests that many may have been disheartened by what they found in the city.[39]

Black southern migration to Boston remained modest during the 1920s. The city added fewer than two hundred Black southerners during the decade. Migration slowed considerably across the country during the Great Depression. The volume of migrants, as estimated by the historian James Gregory, dropped by half. Boston gained about a thousand southern-born Black residents during the thirties.[40]

World War II changed everything. Demand for workers in cities in the North and West drove Black migration to unprecedented levels. The reasons were the same as they had been during World War I. Industries suffered labor shortages because they lost workers to the military, immigration from Europe largely stopped, and factories accelerated production to aid the war effort. Black workers who left the South helped satisfy those labor needs.[41] Cities in the North and West, including Boston, experienced their greatest surge in

Black worker at the Boston Naval Shipyard, 1946. The shipyard added more than forty-six thousand workers during World War II, many of them minorities. Millions of Black migrants came north during the war years, drawn by the availability of industrial jobs. First Naval District, US Navy.

Black migration during the war years. Nearly 1.5 million Black people fled the South during the 1940s, three times as many as moved in the previous decade. Boston's Black population and the number of southern-born Black people living in the city nearly doubled in ten years. The city gained nine thousand southern-born Black residents. In 1950, people born in the South made up 42 percent of Black residents in the city.[42]

Defense industries increased production, and other companies retooled to help in the war effort. The Boston Naval Shipyard produced dozens of ships for the military and added more than forty-six thousand workers during the war, hiring many minorities and women. Gillette, the Boston-based razor-blade manufacturer, began making parts for military aircraft and was ordered by the US government to reserve all its razors and blades for soldiers.[43]

"Factories were pleading for manpower," the *Boston Globe* reported. "There were plenty of good jobs available."[44]

World War II also helped boost Black migration after the war. Many Black men first experienced life outside the segregated South while they were serving in the military. What they saw inspired some of them to leave the region permanently once they were discharged. Many Black soldiers passed through Fort Devens, an army base in the Boston suburbs, which had sixty-five thousand soldiers in uniform at peak activity. The military was still segregated at the time, but an all-Black unit, the 366th Infantry Regiment, was based there. Countless Black soldiers who served in Massachusetts chose to return to Boston to live after the war.[45]

The rising Black population stimulated growth in all areas of Boston's Black community. The Black residential district expanded outward from the South End and lower Roxbury to upper Roxbury and beyond. By 1950, there were more than fifty Black churches in Boston. Some, such as Charles Street AME, relocated to be nearer to the new centers of the Black population. Black people formed social service organizations, such as Roxbury's Freedom House. Black-oriented businesses spread along Tremont and Washington Streets in the South End and Roxbury. Black diners ate barbecue at Slade's and southern cooking at Estelle's. They listened to jazz at the Hi-Hat Club and Pioneer Club, a private after-hours club where Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong once jammed until 6:00 a.m.[46]

Boston's expanding Black community made a powerful impression on a young Malcolm Little, who later became the radical civil rights leader Malcolm X. Little moved to Boston from Michigan in 1940 to live with his half-sister, Ella Little-Collins, who had migrated to the city from Georgia. He was fourteen years old and had dropped out of school after the eighth grade. He lived in Boston for seven years (and later returned to help found the city's first Nation of Islam temple). Little and his sister resided in the Sugar Hill section of upper Roxbury, an area that was home to many of Boston's northern-born Black elites. But lower Roxbury, where most southern Blacks lived and socialized, was the part of Boston that opened the eyes of the young Malcolm X.

"No physical move in my life has been more pivotal or profound in its repercussions," Malcolm X wrote in his autobiography. "I didn't know the world contained as many negroes as I saw thronging downtown Roxbury at night. Neon lights, nightclubs, pool halls, bars, the cars they drove! Restaurants made the streets smell—rich, greasy, down-home Black cooking!

Jukeboxes blared Erskine Hawkins, Duke Ellington, Cootie Williams, dozens of others. I saw for the first time occasional White-Black couples strolling around arm in arm. I saw churches for Black people such as I had never seen."[47]

The Black social environment in Boston may have been blossoming, but Black people still struggled to gain political influence in the city, and White political leaders took actions that assured they would not. In 1949, Boston revised its charter to change how city council members were elected. Previously, councilors were elected to represent geographically defined wards, but after the revision, all councilors were elected "at large" to represent the entire city. In 1950, Black people made up only 5 percent of the city's population, making it difficult for them to win citywide elections. After the charter revision, no Black candidate was able to win election to the city council for nearly twenty years.[48] "Everything was being done to keep Blacks out of office," Michael Haynes, a prominent Black minister, pastor of Twelfth Baptist Church, later said.[49]

Boston's economy, which had been stagnant for three decades, expanded greatly after World War II as the city and region developed into a high-tech center, partly based on research begun under wartime military contracts. Route 128, the ring road that encircles Boston, became known as "The Technology Highway." Waltham-based Raytheon became one of the largest aerospace and defense companies in the world. Computer companies Digital Equipment Corp. and Wang Laboratories employed more than thirty-five thousand workers. MIT professors started dozens of companies to market their innovations. The presence of world-class hospitals and university researchers stimulated the emergence of a biotechnology sector and enlargement of the healthcare industry. Regional growth created demand for workers in all sectors of the economy, which encouraged the continued migration of Black southerners to the city.[50]

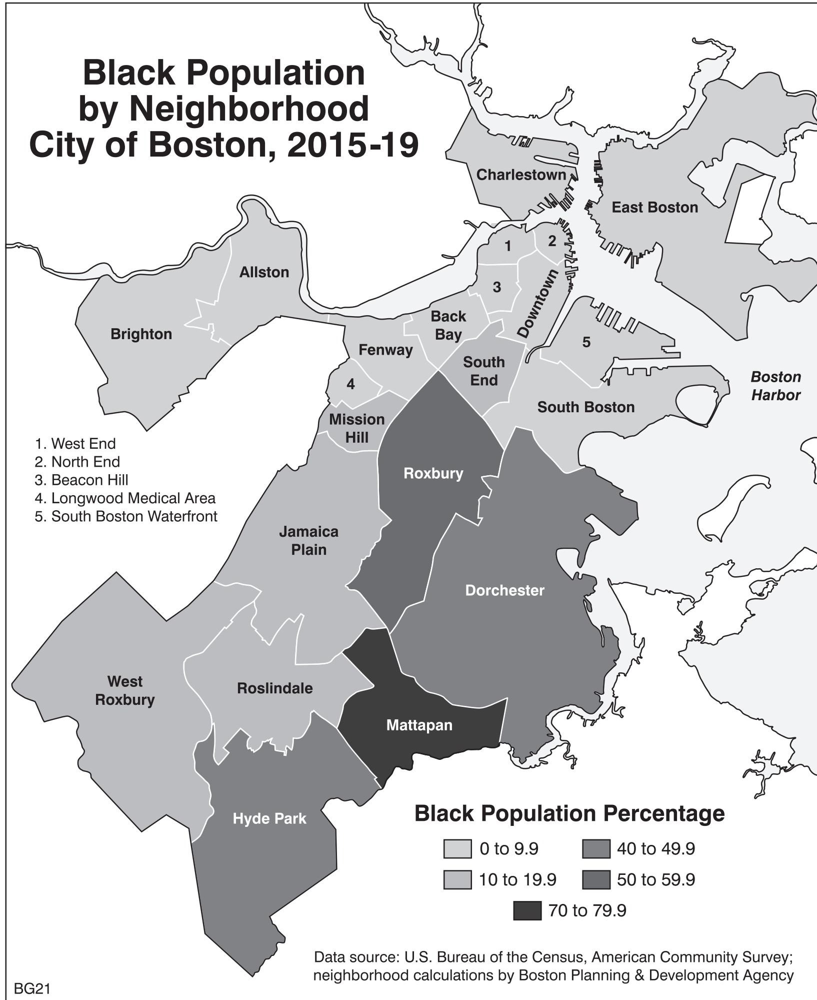
Between 1950 and 1980, the city's Black population tripled, and its number of southern-born Black people doubled. The Black population in the metropolitan area, including the suburbs, quadrupled to more than 160,000. Not all the Black population growth could be attributed to migration from the South. The city also saw increasing Black immigration from the Caribbean and Africa, especially Barbados, Jamaica, and the Cape Verde islands.[51]

The source areas for Black migrants from the South changed as transportation evolved. As cars, buses, and airplanes replaced railroads and ships as

An unidentified band performs at the Hi-Hat Club on Columbus Avenue in the South End, circa 1950. The South End and lower Roxbury became the focus of Black social activity as Boston's Black population grew due to migration from the South. Photograph by Winifred Irish Hall; used with permission, Northeastern University Archives and Special Collections.

the principal means of travel, migrants came from further away and from a greater variety of places than before. By 1980, nearly one-fifth of southern-born Black people living in Boston had been born in Georgia, which provided more than any other state. But nearly as many came from Alabama, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Virginia was no longer one of the top suppliers. Significant numbers of migrants came from as far away as Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas.[52]

The Black southern migrants who arrived after World War II needed housing for themselves and their families. The Black district expanded southward across Roxbury, then to Dorchester, and eventually to Mattapan and Hyde Park. By 1980, four out of every five Black residents of Boston lived in those four neighborhoods. The South End's Black population declined, as lower-income residents were pushed out by urban renewal and gentrification.[53]



Black migration from the South transformed Boston's racial and ethnic geography. By 1980, four-fifths of Black residents lived in just four neighborhoods—Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, and Hyde Park. That is still true today. Map by Blake Gumprecht.

As Black residents left the South End and Black migrants from the South arrived in the city, Roxbury and Dorchester became the heart of Black Boston. In 1950, Roxbury was still three-quarters White, but over the next three decades the racial makeup of the neighborhood reversed. By 1980,

Black residents made up 80 percent of the population. Urban renewal and slum clearance in Roxbury during the 1960s reduced the housing supply there, forcing Black people to move further south to Dorchester. The Black population continued to grow, causing residents to seek new areas to live. Black people began moving to Mattapan in large numbers in the seventies and Hyde Park in the eighties.

Before Black people began moving to the four neighborhoods where most live today, residents of those areas were primarily Jewish and Irish Catholic. Most areas where Black people settled initially had been Jewish districts, but Black residents eventually displaced Irish Catholics from many areas, too. A few Catholic areas were able to resist racial turnover. The historian and political scientist Gerald Gamm has convincingly argued that Jewish people experiencing racial change in their neighborhoods were more likely to leave those areas than Catholics because their chief institutions, synagogues, are movable. Catholic parishes are not. They are territorially defined institutions and Catholics living in them are anchored to those neighborhoods by their churches. They were less willing to leave and more likely to stay and fight.[54]

Dorchester added thirty-five thousand Black residents during the 1960s as Black settlement spread south along Blue Hill Avenue, once the main thoroughfare of Jewish Boston. Block after block, Black people moved in and Jewish and other White residents moved out. "The process of change was relentless," Gamm observed. From Dorchester, Black settlement moved south along Blue Hill to predominantly Jewish Mattapan. More than ten thousand Black residents moved to Mattapan in the 1970s, changing it to a majority-Black neighborhood. That process was aided by a city-organized program to increase lending to minority homebuyers, the Boston Banks Urban Renewal Group program. Mattapan became home to middle-class Black people who could afford to buy homes, while incomes in Roxbury and Dorchester were lower, poverty was more prevalent, and most residents rented.

Upper Roxbury and the north Dorchester were already declining neighborhoods when Black people started moving to them in large numbers. Some of the housing was a hundred years old. Most of it had been built between 1870 and 1900, as streetcar lines were extended outward from the city center. Many of the houses had already filtered down from the Boston businessmen who were the original owners to the Jewish middle class and then to working-class Jews, who did not have enough money to maintain or restore the aging structures. By the 1950s, when Jewish people were leaving these areas for good, much of the housing was rundown and in need of

repair. Some areas were on their way to becoming slums. In 1960, 41 percent of housing units in Roxbury and 18 percent in north Dorchester were classified as "dilapidated" or "deteriorated."[55]

As Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan became Black neighborhoods, Blue Hill Avenue evolved into the commercial spine of the Black community. For decades, it had been the main street of Jewish Boston, nicknamed "Jew Hill Avenue." Stretching four miles from Roxbury south to the Boston city limits, it had been lined with kosher butchers, fish markets, delicatessens, bakeries making challah and other Jewish specialties, and Jewish wedding halls. Gradually, Jewish merchants followed their customers to the suburbs and were replaced by businesses and institutions catering to Black residents—barbecue and soul food restaurants, Black barbershops and beauty salons, record stores selling R & B and jazz, and storefront churches. It also became home to several Black civil rights organizations. The Black Panthers took over a former dry-cleaning shop. "Once, it was a world peopled with the Yiddish and their offspring," Alan Lupo wrote in the *Boston Globe* in 1969. "Today, it is more Mississippi than Minsk."[56]

The expansion of Black Boston gave rise to racial conflicts within the city. As often happens when racial transition is sudden, long-term residents reacted angrily to the changes. That was especially true in Catholic parts of Roxbury and Dorchester. Black residents were attacked or harassed when they moved into those areas. Violence was most common after a federal judge in 1974 required Boston to implement busing to desegregate its schools, which inflamed racial tensions throughout the city. White youths threw stones at the cars of Black families looking for homes. Arsonists burned the garage and car of a Black man who bought a house in Mattapan. Some Black people responded to the hostility by attacking Whites and their institutions. Black teens mugged elderly Jews on Blue Hill Avenue. Two Black men threw acid in the face of a Mattapan rabbi; his synagogue was sold a month later. Other synagogues and Catholic churches were set on fire.[57]

Most White residents responded to the Black influx not with violence, but by relocating to the suburbs. As late as 1960, Dorchester and Mattapan were still almost completely White, but they were transformed over the next two decades. Dorchester lost nearly one hundred thousand White residents in twenty years, while Mattapan's White population declined by three-quarters. More than fifty thousand Jewish residents left upper Roxbury and Dorchester from 1950 to 1970, and they continued to exit. Catholics remained in the area longer, but their population declined by more than half between 1960 and

1980. There are still strong Irish Catholic pockets in southeastern Dorchester. White flight to the suburbs caused Boston's White population to fall by 365,000 people between 1950 and 1980, the prime period of Black southern migration. In the process, Boston became one of the most segregated cities in the United States—more segregated than southern cities such as Atlanta, New Orleans, and Birmingham.[58]

As Boston's Black population grew, Black people organized to demand equal rights. They protested racial discrimination in public housing and lending by banks for home mortgages. The city of Boston in response created the Boston Banks Urban Renewal Group program, an agreement with local banks intended to increase lending to minority homebuyers. Because B-BURG loans were restricted by geography to Roxbury, Dorchester, and adjacent areas, the program contributed to residential segregation and ensured that the Black population would remain concentrated in one part of the city. The B-BURG program has also been blamed for driving Jews out of Mattapan.[59]

Activists also organized to demand that Boston businesses increase their hiring of Black workers. They convinced the city to adopt rules requiring construction projects to hire more Black laborers. An organization led by Black mothers, meanwhile, protested their treatment by the city's welfare department and, in 1967, seized control of a welfare office in the Grove Hall section of Roxbury to draw attention to their demands. When they were forcibly removed by police, Black people rioted up and down Blue Hill Avenue for three days, causing millions of dollars in property damage.[60]

The economic status of Black workers in Boston gradually improved, as federal and state governments sought to eliminate employment discrimination. The proportion of Black people who worked as unskilled laborers fell by half from 1940 to 1970, while the share who worked in white-collar occupations, as factory workers, and skilled laborers rose significantly. Despite those gains, the income gap between Black and White workers actually grew. Black males in 1949 earned 72 percent as much as White males, but by 1979 they earned 64 percent as much. That suggests that while Black workers had gained entry into preferred careers, they were still relegated to lower-paying jobs within those occupations. Poverty also remained widespread in the Black community. In 1979, one-quarter of Black families had incomes below the federal government's poverty level. Boston's Black unemployment rate was near double that of Whites.[61]

Because school assignments were based on residential location, school segregation in Boston grew as Black residents came to make up an increasing share of the population in the neighborhoods where they

Black students arrive at South Boston High School as police stand guard on the first day of court-ordered busing in Boston in September 1974. Used with permission, Bettman Archive, Getty Images.

lived. Most Black children attended schools that had few White students. Parents complained that schools in Black neighborhoods were old, run-down, and inferior in quality to those in White parts of the city. There were few Black teachers in the schools. Boston may have been more progressive than Birmingham, but northern Whites practiced their own forms of racism.

Black people waged their most sustained battles over the schools. They demanded the city address persistent inequities. Schools in Black neighborhoods in the early 1960s received 65 percent as much funding per pupil as schools in White sections, comparable to racial disparities that existed in the South during the Jim Crow era. In 1965, after all efforts to reform Boston schools failed, the Boston chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People sued the city, demanding an end to school segregation.

Eventually, in 1974, a federal judge ordered Boston to implement busing to integrate its schools, which stimulated a violent and sustained resistance by White Bostonians. Busing opponents staged protests all year long, many of

them openly and shockingly racist. Protestors threw rocks at school buses carrying Black children, breaking windows. They shouted racial epithets at Black youngsters. Many White parents kept their children at home rather than send them to school with Black children, while other White families enrolled their kids in private schools. The racist attitudes expressed by White people during the busing crisis, especially in traditional Irish neighborhoods such as South Boston and Charlestown, focused unfavorable attention on Boston nationally. South Boston was compared to Selma, Alabama, as a symbol of bigotry.[62]

The proportion of Black people in Boston who were born in the South diminished over time. By 1980, there were about thirty-six thousand southern-born Black people living in the city, 28 percent of its Black residents. But those numbers are deceiving and do not accurately convey the impact of the Great Migration on Boston because they exclude the children and grandchildren of migrants, who would not likely have been in the city had their kin not moved north. There is no precise way to measure the number of people who are the children or grandchildren of Black southern migrants, because such data are not collected. However, it is possible to calculate estimates of the number of migrant children, which helps us better appreciate how important the Great Migration has been to the making of Black Boston.

If Black women in Boston who were born in the South had children at the same rates as Black women in Massachusetts in 1980, they would have had about twenty-five thousand children. That suggests that nearly half of Black people in Boston in that year were born in the South or were the children of mothers born in the South. While some of the children may have been migrants themselves, so counted twice, that estimate still undercounts the children of southern migrants because it does not include the children of Black males whose partners were nonsoutherners. Moreover, it does not include the grandchildren of Black southern migrants, and they would likely have been numerous by 1980. In truth, the number of Black people in Boston with southern roots was likely considerably larger. It seems safe to assume that at least half of Black residents of Boston in 1980 were born in the South or were the descendants of people who were.[63]

Black migration from the South slowed considerably in the 1970s and a return migration developed, especially among Black people who missed the land and culture of their youth. The South has changed. Discrimination and overt racism have diminished. Opportunities for Black people have improved, particularly in booming cities such as

Atlanta and Houston. Some Black people who left the South chose to return home. Others who were born in the North but felt an ancestral pull to the South joined them.[64]

As migration northward diminished, the share of Black Bostonians born in the South continued to decline, so that by 2019 barely one in ten Black residents of the city were southern born, though a much higher percentage had southern roots.[65] Yet for more than a century, Black people born in the South made up anywhere from one-third to three-fifths of native-born Blacks in the city. They strongly influenced the development of Boston's Black community.

Black migration from the South transformed the Black population in Boston from a small minority community into the largest non-White group in the city and helped make Boston the majority-minority city that it is today. Non-Hispanic White residents make up an ever-shrinking portion of the city's population, declining from 97 percent in 1940 to 44 percent in 2018. During the same period, the Black population share grew from 3 to 23 percent. Boston's Black population share is even higher, 29 percent in 2019, if people who claimed to be multiracial are counted.[66]

Has the Great Migration been worth it? In an essay in the *Boston Globe Magazine*, Kim McLarin questioned whether it was. A novelist and professor at Emerson College in Boston, she is hardly the typical Black migrant from the South. She came to New England from Memphis at age fifteen to attend Phillips Exeter Academy, an elite prep school in New Hampshire. She wrote that she had never heard the word "nigger" applied to her until she lived in Exeter.

Noting that Black unemployment rates are no better in the North than in most southern states and that Black youth in Boston graduate from high school at "virtually the same low rate" as Black people in Mississippi, she wondered whether Black incarceration rates, homeownership rates, and the wealth gap were any better in Boston than in the South. Reflecting on Isabel Wilkerson's award-winning book about the Great Migration, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, McLarin wrote, "If you transplant but the transplant doesn't take, where does that leave you? Still better off than in the rocky soil you left behind? Or dry and withering in the sun?" She asked, "Had we stayed 'home' and, as Booker T. [Washington] suggested, acquired land,

built more institutions, and worked collectively, would we, as a people, be better off?"[67]

None of the Black southern migrants featured in this book enjoy the comparative luxury of McLarin, a tenured professor and award-winning author. None seem to have spent much time reflecting on whether their moves were worth it. But none expressed any serious regrets about moving to Boston. All stayed and rejected suggestions that they return to the land of their birth. Assessing whether the Great Migration was worth it is more complicated than McLarin suggests. It cannot be evaluated using statistical indicators alone. There are countless other factors that must also be considered. The life histories that follow help us better understand that.