

Searching for Greener Pastures: Out–Migration in the 1800s and 1900s

By Donald R. Lennon and Fred D. Ragan

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Frederick Marryat, an English visitor traveling through the Ohio Valley in 1838, was surprised at the stream of emigration which appears to flow from North Carolina to Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri. Every hour you meet with a caravan of emigrants from that sterile but healthy state. Every night the banks of the Ohio are lighted up with their fires.

Marryat's observations were not unusual during the first half of the 1800s. North Carolina was the third most populous state in the Union in 1790, but by 1860 it had dropped to twelfth in population. Hundreds of thousands of White North Carolinians fled the state during those years, seeking cheap, fertile land in Tennessee, western Georgia, Indiana, Alabama, Missouri, Mississippi, and other trans-Allegheny states and territories. Thirty percent of North Carolina's native-born population, amounting to more than four hundred thousand persons, was living outside of the state in 1860.

European American Out-Migration

The migration west actually began before the Revolutionary War (1775–1783), as adventurous North Carolinians followed Daniel Boone in search of new frontiers beyond the mountains. After the war, veterans of the Revolution were rewarded with free land in what became Tennessee. Land speculators also rushed into that area in search of wealth.

Among these speculators were members of the Polk family of Mecklenburg County. By 1806 Samuel Polk and his young family joined their kinsmen on the Tennessee frontier. Sam's oldest child was eleven-year-old James K. Polk. Born in North Carolina, he went on to become the eleventh president of the United States.

After the War of 1812, the caravans of wagons moving west increased, but the reasons were different. North Carolina had become known as the Rip Van Winkle State. State leaders opposed spending tax money on schools, roads, agricultural reforms, or any other form of economic advancement. Their opposition hurt the state's people. Without good roads to get crops to market, farmers could not make profits. Without progressive leadership in agricultural reforms, farmers did not learn about the importance of crop rotation. Instead, they continued old farming practices that used up nutrients in the soil and exhausted the land. Although newspapers and reformers pointed out the high degree of ignorance and poverty in which people lived, state leaders seemed to pay no attention to the needs of the people.

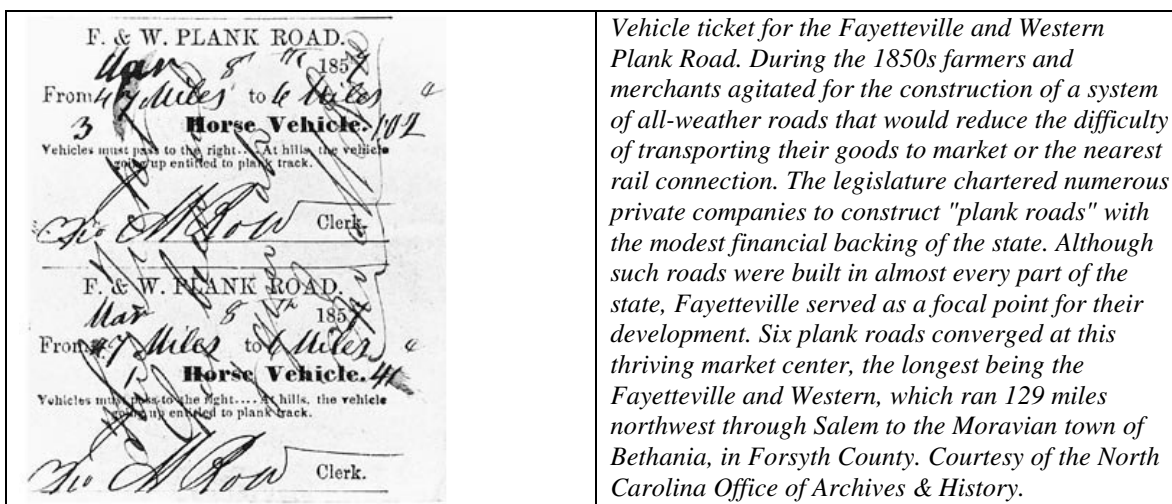
Disgusted by the state's do-nothing policy, farmers gave up on their exhausted lands and moved west, where they could find cheaper, more fertile land to farm. In 1834 a Raleigh newspaper reported that "our roads are thronged with emigrants to a more favored Country." As late as 1845, a Greensboro newspaper proclaimed, "On last Tuesday morning nineteen carts, with about one hundred persons, passed this place, from Wake County, on their way to the West."

Marryat, the English visitor, wrote

these caravans consist of two or three covered wagons, full of women and children, furniture, and other necessaries, each drawn by a team of horses; brood mares, with foals by their sides, following; half a dozen or more cows, flanked on each side by the men, with their long rifles on their shoulders; sometimes a boy or two, or a half-grown girl on horseback.

Young, energetic, and ambitious citizens were leaving. Many of these talented North Carolinians later became presidents, vice presidents, and cabinet members of the United States government, as well as governors and congressmen for their adopted states. Presidents Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, and Andrew Johnson were among the future leaders who left.

Conditions in North Carolina did not begin to improve until a progressive political leadership gained control of the state in 1835. The state constitution was rewritten to create a state and local government that was more democratic and responsive to the people. Even then, progress was slow.



In 1840 the first public school was established. Soon railroads were introduced, with tracks stretching across the state. Plank roads and other internal improvements developed. Manufacturing began to flourish. At last North Carolina could shake its Rip

Van Winkle image. Once White North Carolinians felt they could prosper at home, the massive emigration of White citizens out of the state began to decline.

African American Out-Migration

The out-migration of African Americans increased after the Civil War (1861–1865). The war brought freedom for former slaves but did not satisfy their desire for a better life. Faced with poverty and a political environment that was becoming more and more repressive, many North Carolina Blacks moved north, where they could find better opportunities. During the last quarter of the 1800s, approximately one hundred thousand African Americans emigrated from the Tar Heel State.

An extreme example of North Carolina’s repressive political environment is represented by the 1898 Wilmington race riot. In the 1890s farm prices had declined, which meant that farmers were making less money by selling their crops. Farmers protested by forming a new political party, the Populist Party, that challenged the Democratic and Republican Parties. In the 1896 state elections, Populists and Republicans elected a number of African American officials. A Republican governor also was elected.

Democrats charged that the state had fallen under “Black domination.”



Alexander Manly, 1890s. Courtesy of the North Carolina Office of Archives & History.

Two years later, in the 1898 election, Democrats tried to frighten White voters by saying that African Americans were going to rule the state if the Democrats lost. Red Shirts paraded on horseback with weapons in full view to intimidate Black voters. Some Blacks rejected the threat and spoke out. Alex Manly, the militant and progressive editor of the *Wilmington Daily Record*, was among them.

Democrats won the election. Soon afterward a mob of four hundred Whites demolished Manly’s newspaper office, shot up the African American section of town, killed and wounded a large number of Blacks, and drove hundreds from their homes. Hundreds more, including Manly, fled Wilmington.

In 1900, White voters changed the state constitution by requiring that anyone who registered to vote had to pay a poll tax and take a literacy test. The voters also passed a “grandfather clause.” This clause stated that if a person failed the literacy test, that person could still vote if he, his father, or his grandfather had voted before January 1, 1867. African Americans who had been slaves were not able to vote before 1867. Even free Blacks had lost the right to vote in 1835. As a result, these changes in the constitution disfranchised Blacks much more than Whites.

The Tar Heel State also began to pass Jim Crow laws that required segregation, or separation of different races. On buses, in theaters, at restaurants, and in other public places, African Americans could not sit with Whites. Instead they were forced to sit in separate sections. They had to attend separate schools, which were usually underfunded. They were not allowed to work at the same jobs as Whites.



A separate drinking fountain on the county courthouse lawn, Halifax, 1938. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

In response to all of these problems, large numbers of Blacks left the South. Between World War I (1914–1918) and the 1960s, hundreds of thousands of African Americans left southern states. So many left that the movement was called “The Great Migration.” Between 1910 and 1950, approximately 280,000 Black citizens left North Carolina. Their destinations varied, but large numbers went to Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. Many of the same reasons that encouraged earlier Blacks to leave continued to influence these citizens. Discrimination, low wages, and inferior housing and schools exerted a powerful push to leave.

Other factors also contributed to their emigration. In the 1920s and 1930s, the devastation of cotton crops by boll weevils and the gradual replacement of farmworkers with machines left many Black farmworkers unemployed. New Deal farm policies tried to help farmers by driving up the prices of farm goods. These policies limited the number of acres that a farmer could work and limited how much of a crop a farmer could grow. But these changes eliminated agricultural jobs and left many unemployed. These unemployed people often went north to find work.

During World War II (1941–1945) the military draft and increased job opportunities in the North also pulled at Blacks. Those who were drafted to fight in the war often were sent north, with other soldiers, to train for battle. While there, many saw better opportunities and decided to remain after the war. Others went to the North to work in growing defense industries.

Ambitious and talented Black families were among those leaving. Many native North Carolinians made significant contributions to their new states. For example, lawyer, publisher, and journalist Robert L. Vann founded the Pittsburgh Courier. Wilson Goode became mayor of Philadelphia. John Coltrane, Thelonius Monk, and Roberta Flack made important contributions to music.

With the advances made by the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, the end of segregation, and the growth of jobs in the Sun Belt region in the 1970s, North Carolina’s African Americans have received much less of a push out of the state than in earlier times. Barriers to better economic and educational opportunities are falling in North Carolina. With improvements at home, many now feel that they can prosper and have the full life promised by the American dream in North Carolina.

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