

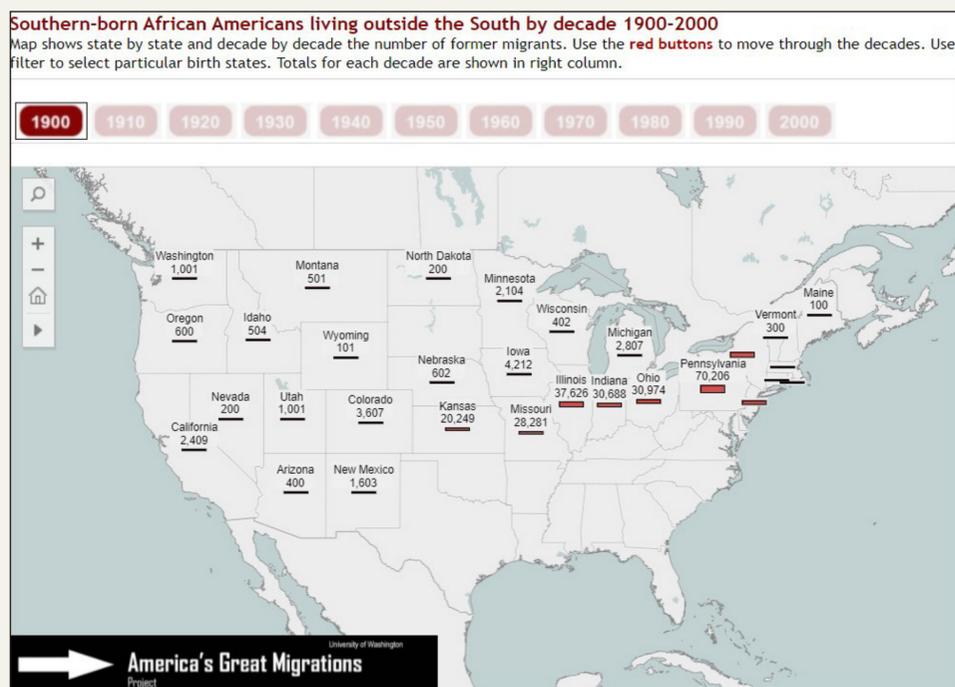
The Great Migration

At the turn of the twentieth century, Jim Crow rigidly controlled African American life in the South. In response, some individuals and families chose to migrate north and west. Through the 1910s and 1920s this migration became so wide spread that it is termed the “Great Migration.”



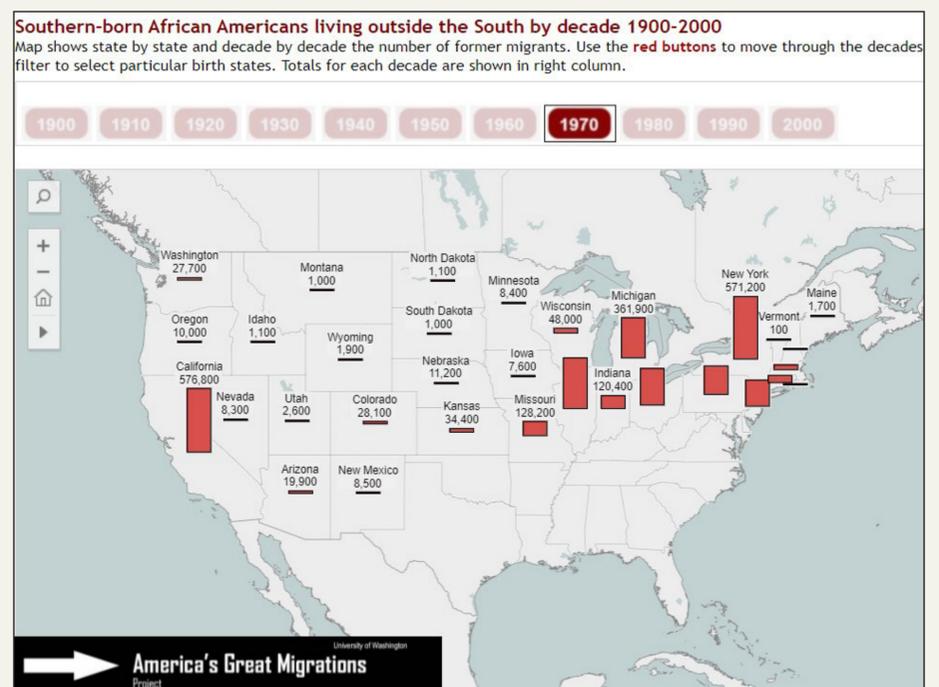
Boll Weevil. *Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

Between 1910 and 1970 more than six million African Americans migrated out of the South. The Great Migration is often split into two waves, first from 1910-1930 and the second during the 1940s. Alongside racism and segregation, the cotton boll weevil devastated crops throughout the South, limiting economic opportunities in the region.



A map of African American migration out of the South before the Great Migration, in 1900.

Courtesy of America's Great Migrations Project.



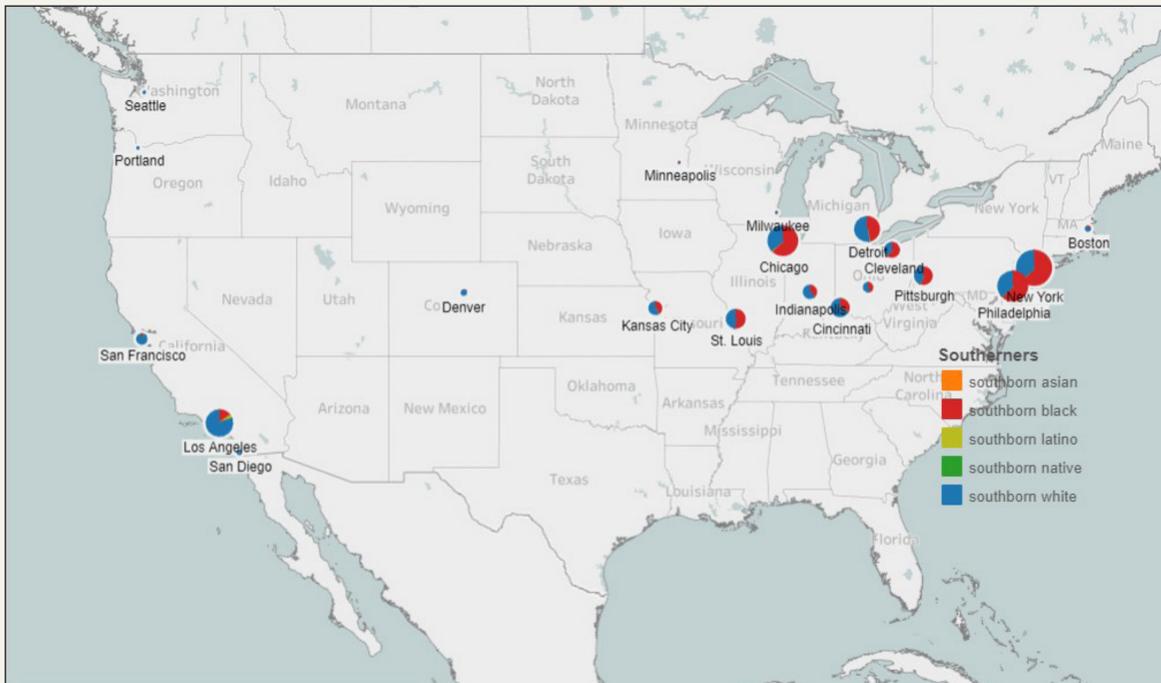
A map of African American migration out of the South at the end of the Great Migration, in 1970.

Courtesy of America's Great Migrations Project.

Many African American laborers lost work as a result, and for those who kept their jobs, the share cropping system of Southern agriculture offered little chance for advancement. Oppressive economic and social conditions encouraged migration north, along with openings in Northern factories.

The First Wave

As the first World War decreased European immigration to Northern cities, factories lost a significant labor source. Labor recruiters travelled south to hire African Americans. Some states required recruiters to pay exorbitant fees and provide vouchers from locals in order to slow migration. However, many African Americans travelled north on their own.



A map showing the racial distributions of migrants to Northern and Western cities through 1930 at the end of the first wave of the Great Migration. *Courtesy of America's Great Migrations Project.*

Despite hopes of escaping segregation, many African Americans faced prejudice in the North that was just as deep seated as the South. As immigrants had been, African Americans were confined to certain areas of cities. Discrimination worsened as African American workers were hired in place of striking workers during unionizing efforts.

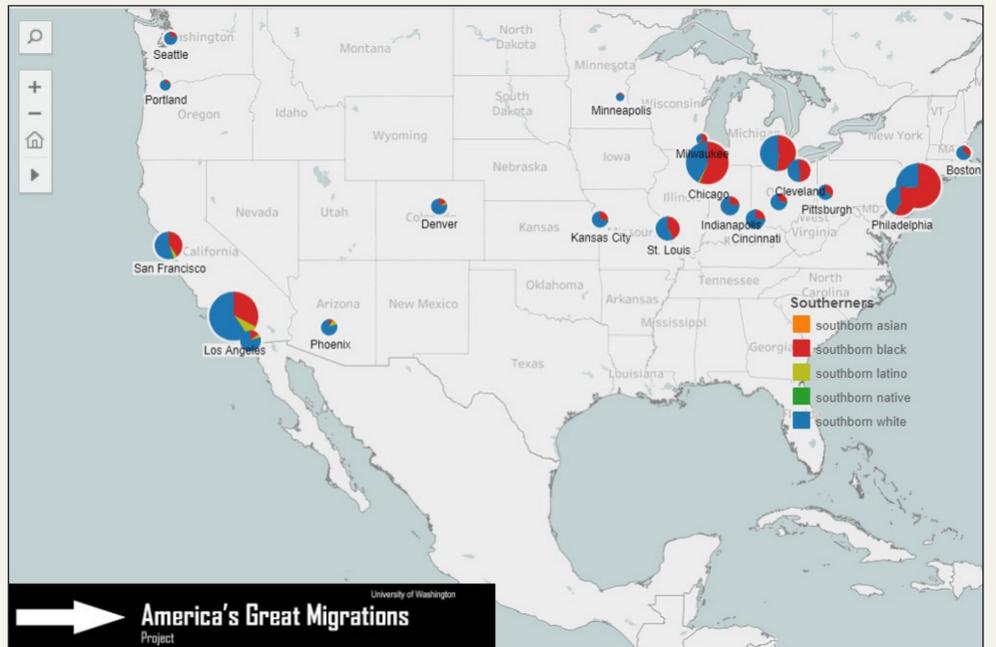


This prejudice and resentment often led to racial violence. The Red Summer of 1919, months of unparalleled lynchings and mob violence, occurred as African American soldiers returned home from WWI. Two years later, the black business district in Tulsa, Oklahoma was burned to the ground by white citizens.

The ruins of the predominantly African American neighborhood Greenwood in Tulsa, OK after attacks by a white mob. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

The Second Wave

The Great Depression slowed migration in the 1930s to below 1910s figures. However, WWII increased labor demand in Northern and Western factories and migration skyrocketed. The number of African Americans migrating out of the South peaked in the 1940s, though the migration remained higher than 1910s levels through the rest of the century.



A map showing the racial distributions of migrants to Northern and Western cities through 1970 at the end of the Great Migration.

Courtesy of America's Great Migrations Project.



“Evelyn T. Gray, Riveter and Pearlyne Smiley, Bucker, Complete a Job on Center Section of a Bomber.” *Courtesy of the National Archives.*

Wartime production made California a center of defense manufacturing. African American migration to California out of the south increased as a result during the 1940s. There was also steady migration to Midwestern states, including Missouri, Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan.

While African Americans found open industrial jobs in their new states, they also faced entrenched racism. Housing covenants and redlining kept communities segregated. After the war, as manufacturing jobs began to decrease, white flight to the suburbs deprived cities and African Americans residents of public services.

Racism Outside of South

African Americans faced racism in the Northern, Midwestern, and Western states they migrated to, regardless of the decade. African Americans were barred from certain communities, faced wage discrimination, and limits on advancement in their jobs. Throughout this period, Jim Crow Era stereotypes encouraged harmful media representations as well.

These stereotypes included minstrel shows, blackface on tv and in newspaper comic strips, and “coon songs” that were common at the time. Media representations reinforced negative ideas around African American social aspirations, food preferences, and the invented stereotypes of crime and gambling. When African Americans arrived from the South, it was these stereotypes they faced in finding employment and homes.



Left: A page from the Seattle Sunday Times (August 31, 1930) advertising the new Coon Chicken Inn. *Courtesy of the Seattle Sunday Times.*

Below: Sign placed at the Sojourner Truth homes, which was a United States Housing project in Detroit. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

One of the most blatant examples of racism is the Coon Chicken Inn, located in Utah, Washington, and Oregon. Aside from the racist name, the restaurant included branding of a character in blackface. The building of the restaurant was in the shape of a head, with patrons walking in through the mouth.



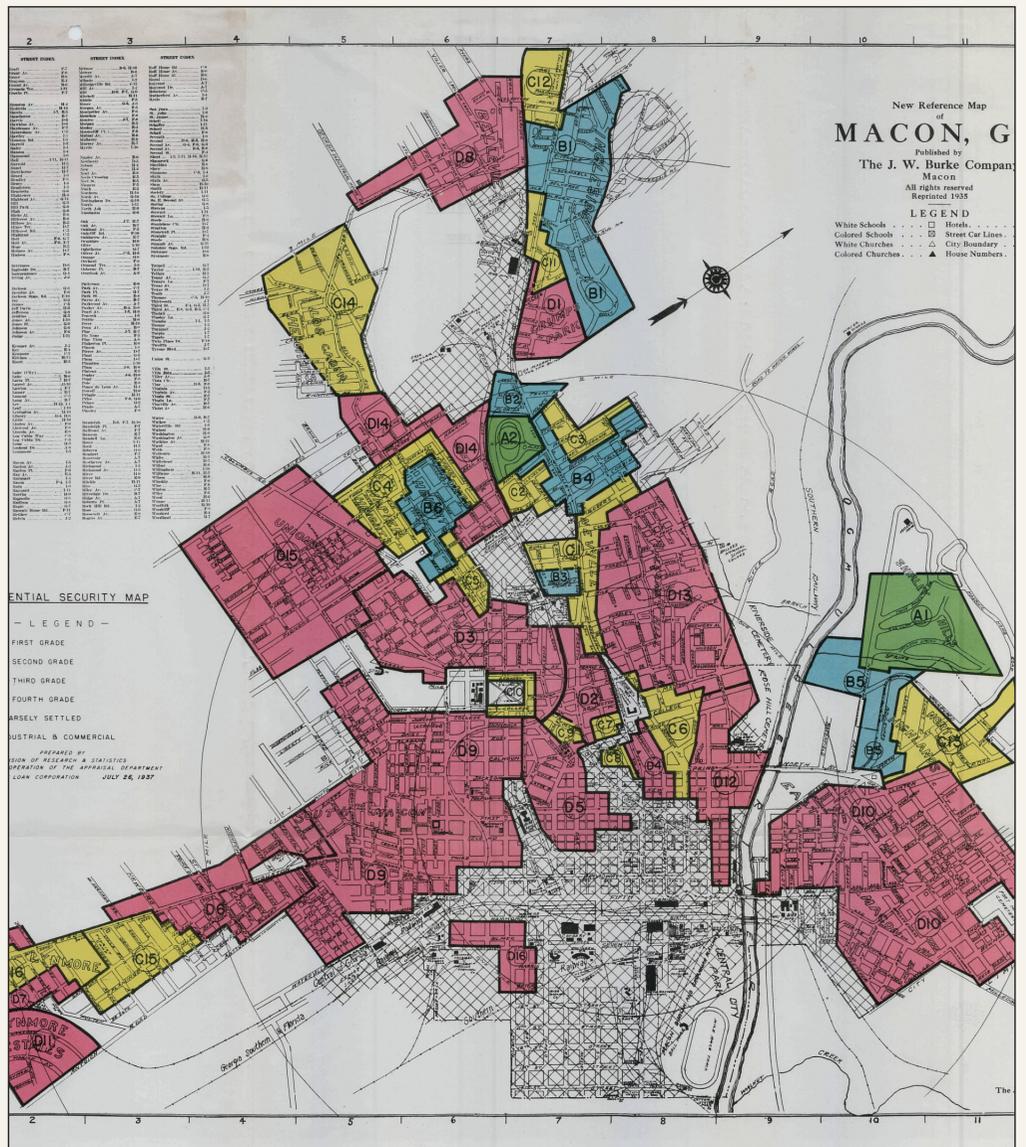
Redlining

The term Redlining comes from color-coded maps used by the Federal Housing Administration to determine which areas of cities the government would insure mortgages through various New Deal programs of the 1930s. Green was deemed “A” or “first grade” blue was “B” yellow “C” and red “D” or “fourth grade.”

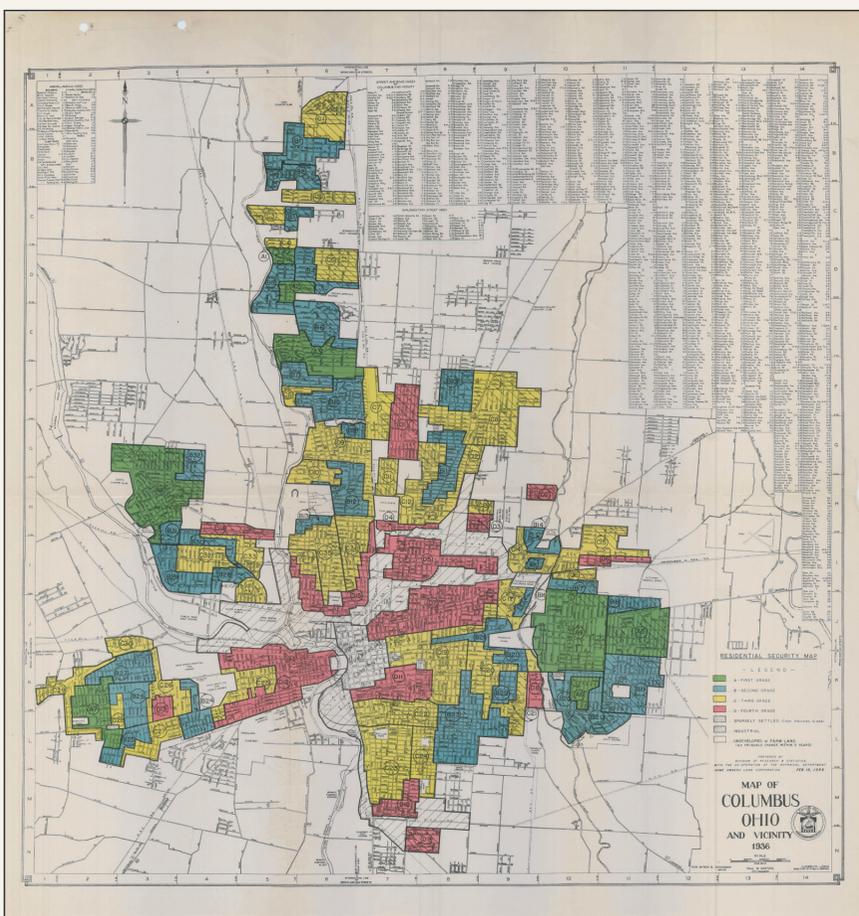
Red signaled that the property values were likely to go down, and therefore should not be included in government-insured mortgage programs. However, this determination of property value was based on the idea that if African Americans bought homes near whites, white property values would decrease. This idea was not based on any fact.

Right: The Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) map for Macon, GA.

Below: The HOLC Map for Columbus, OH.
Courtesy of Mapping Inequality.



African American homeownership actually increased property values, because African American families were willing to pay more money for houses than white families, given that they had fewer options. Nevertheless, redlining and government funding of white-only housing developments created suburban segregation. African American families were restricted to the inner cities where they could not gain home equity or build generational wealth.



Institutional Racism

The Federal Housing Authority's mortgage policies were intentionally created to segregate housing. In the Underwriting Manual of the Federal Housing Authority, racial covenants are suggested to ensure that "incompatible racial groups" do not live side by side. Racial covenants were agreements made by developers (and later owners) of housing communities to never sell to African American families.

The Underwriting Manual also recommends building highways to separate white and African American neighborhoods. The FHA's policies are not laws, but they are regulations meaning that they are not de facto, or social, segregation. As the highway system expanded across the country, many were built through African American city districts and neighborhoods.



The current Lake Martin dam, whose creation flooded the African American town of Benson, AL. *Courtesy of Encyclopedia of Alabama.*

Homes, businesses, and recreation areas were destroyed in what is known as Developmentally Induced Displacement, in which private property is used to build public works projects. River damming also affected African American towns in the U.S., in Alabama two African American towns were flooded when the Martin dam was completed and formed Lake Martin.

Case Study: The GI Bill

The GI Bill was written to help WWII veterans' transition back to civilian life by providing affordable home mortgages, unemployment benefits, and education payment. While the law was written inclusively, the implementation of programs was left to states. In practice, African American veterans were excluded from the bill's benefits.



African American women faced double discrimination due to race and gender as veterans trying to claim GI Bill benefits.

“Somewhere in England, Maj. Charity E. Adams,...and Capt. Abbie N. Campbell,...inspect the first contingent of Negro members of the Women's Army Corps assigned to overseas service.” February 15, 1954. Courtesy of the National Archives.



“An MP on motorcycle stands ready to answer all calls around his area. Columbus, Georgia.” April 14, 1942. Courtesy of the National Archives.

Under the Federal Housing Authority's policies, banks would not give mortgage loans to black families, even GI mortgages. While white veterans purchased homes and built equity, African Americans were unable to build generational wealth in home equity.

African Americans were also restricted to unskilled jobs well under their military training that paid less than subsistence wages. When veterans turned down an underpaying job, they lost GI unemployment benefits. African American veterans accessed college payments, but were restricted to Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the South, leading to fewer African American veterans attending college than whites.

Further Resources

The Color of Law by Richard Rothstien

The New Jim Crow by

Mapping Inequality Redlining in New Deal America <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=5/39.1/-94.58>

University of Washington's America's Great Migrations Project https://depts.washington.edu/moving1/black_migration.shtml

National Archives: The Great Migration 1910-1970 <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/migrations/great-migration>

National Archives: Rediscovering Black History <https://rediscovering-black-history.blogs.archives.gov/category/great-migration/>

Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/>

“How the GI Bill Left Out African Americans” on Demos <https://www.demos.org/blog/how-gi-bill-left-out-african-americans>

“Returning From War, Returning to Racism” in the Beyond the WWII We Know Series from the New York Times <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/magazine/black-soldiers-wwii-racism.html>

The Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project from the University of Washington: The Coon Chicken Inn North Seattle's Beacon of Bigotry https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/coon_chicken.htm