

Indianapolis at the Time of the Great Migration, 1900-1920

by Carolyn M. Brady

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In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the number of African Americans in Indianapolis more than doubled, growing from 15,931 in 1900 to 34,678 in 1920. This increase was a result of the Great Migration, the movement of large numbers of African Americans from the South to the North in search of work and opportunity. Indianapolis did not see as great an influx of new arrivals as did cities such as Detroit and Chicago, but the growth of the black population would change life in the Hoosier capital.⁽¹⁾

African Americans in southern states heard about opportunities in the North through labor recruiters, black-run newspapers, relatives, and friends. Besides the lure of jobs in the North, a number of factors pushed many African Americans to leave the South. Between 1900 and 1920 natural disasters in the South, such as floods, drought, and boll weevils, destroyed the crops that many African-American farmers depended on for their livelihood. Although racial segregation and discrimination existed in northern states like Indiana, the Jim Crow laws of the South and the decline of black political power there after Reconstruction made the situation in the North seem an improvement by comparison.⁽²⁾ This article looks not so much at the reasons that brought African Americans to Indianapolis, but at the general circumstances they would have encountered in the early twentieth century.

Between 1900 and 1920 the greatest influx of black migration in many northern cities occurred when World War I stopped the flow of European immigration and northern industries began to recruit southern labor (both African-American and white). The federal census, taken every ten years, does not provide information on when migration to Indianapolis peaked between census years, but the city's African-American population increased by 5,885 between 1900 and 1910 and by 12,862 between 1910 and 1920. The rate of growth of the black population between 1900 and 1910 (37 percent) was comparable to the growth of the city's overall population in this decade (38 percent), but the increase of the black population between 1910 and 1920 (59 percent) was significantly greater than that of the city population as a whole (35 percent).⁽³⁾

Proportionally this growth was not as dramatic a change as was witnessed by other northern cities where the African-American populations more than doubled in the decade around World War I. Large cities attracted more newcomers, and Chicago's black population increased by over 65,000 (148 percent). Detroit, which offered jobs in the auto industry, had its black population grow by over 35,000 (611 percent) between 1910 and 1920.⁽⁴⁾

In contrast to many northern cities, however, the black population of Indianapolis had been growing steadily since the end of the Civil War. In 1866, the state supreme court voided the article of the 1851 state constitution that had prohibited African Americans from settling in Indiana, and the number of black residents increased by nearly 500 percent between 1860 and

1870. By 1900, nearly 16,000 African Americans lived in Indianapolis, comprising almost 10 percent of the city's population.⁽⁵⁾ At the beginning of the twentieth century about one in ten residents of Indianapolis was black, compared to much larger cities such as New York and Chicago, where the proportion was about one in fifty.

African Americans arriving from the South in the early 1900s found an established black community with churches, businesses, and social organizations. Indianapolis had three black-run weekly newspapers by 1900, the Freeman, the Recorder and the World. The Recorder often ran a directory of African-American businesses in its Christmas issue. In 1901, this listing included restaurants, hotels, and grocery stores, as well as barbers, physicians, dentists, lawyers, dealers in coal, ice, oil, and junk, and even a clairvoyant.

The relatively high percentage of African-American residents in Indianapolis also gave black voters a certain amount of political clout. Ray Stannard Baker, one of the pioneers of "muckraking" journalism during the Progressive Era, visited the city in the early 1900s while researching race relations in the United States because he "had heard so much of the political power of the Negroes there."⁽⁶⁾ African-American candidates participated in city elections, and at least two black residents, John A. Puryear and Sumner A. Furniss, were elected to the city council. Puryear, a businessman who ran a transfer and moving company, held office from 1892 to 1897, and Furniss, a doctor, served from 1917 to 1921.⁽⁷⁾

Before elections the black newspapers filled up with political campaign advertisements. Successful politicians could offer jobs in return for electoral support. For example, Edward G. Sourbier, a white Republican candidate for county treasurer in 1916, reminded readers of the Recorder that he

had appointed Miss Daneva W. Donnell as one of the stenographers in his office, the first Colored woman in the State of Indiana to be appointed in a public office. That the 9,000 Negro votes in Marion County will be solid for Sourbier as a token of sincere appreciation is a foregone conclusion.⁽⁸⁾

African-American voters often found, however, that white politicians courted their support during elections and then ignored them afterwards. After the Civil War, most black voters in Indianapolis supported the Republican party, the "party of Lincoln," and this would remain true until the 1920s, when the Ku Klux Klan dominated the Republican organization in Indiana.⁽⁹⁾

For many African Americans newly arrived from the South Indianapolis and other northern cities may at first have seemed places of great equality. For example, the ubiquitous signs "FOR WHITE" and "FOR COLORED," symbols of a visible "color line," were missing from public places.⁽¹⁰⁾ Some newcomers probably arrived with idealistic expectations, like the man in Mississippi who told Ray Stannard Baker that he was moving to Indianapolis because

They're Jim Crowin' us down here too much. . . . I hear they don't make no difference up there between white folks and coloured, and that a hard-working man can get two dollars a day.⁽¹¹⁾

Those who moved north hoping to escape the Jim Crow laws of the South found that white residents of northern cities often shared the racist views of their southern counterparts. Baker found that many white residents in Indianapolis were concerned about the growing black population. He wrote:

One of the first white men with whom I talked . . . said to me with some impatience: "There are too many Negroes up here; they hurt the city."

Another told me of the increasing presence of Negroes in the parks, on the streets, and in the street cars. He said: "I suppose sooner or later we shall have to adopt some of the restrictions of the South."⁽¹²⁾

Although some white-owned businesses did solicit black customers by advertising in the Recorder, many other white storekeepers and restaurant and theater owners refused to serve African Americans or attempted to drive them away by rude treatment or inflated prices. Indiana's civil rights law of 1885 stated that places of public accommodation had to serve all people "regardless of color or race," but African Americans who tried to challenge discriminatory practices in court could lose when judges resorted to very literal interpretations of the law. For example, in 1900, a black hairdresser sued an Indianapolis hotel when she was not allowed to use the elevator to reach the room of her customer. The Marion County Superior Court accepted the argument that because the hairdresser was not a guest herself, she had no right to use the hotel's elevator. In a similar decision in 1920, the Appellate Court ruled that an ice cream parlor was not technically an "eating place" and so was not covered by the civil rights law.⁽¹³⁾

Many African Americans did not have the money or time to fight discrimination in court, and newcomers probably learned through experience and word-of-mouth what places in the city to avoid. The growth of the black population created a base of clientele for African-American entrepreneurs to open their own stores, restaurants, and theaters that would provide the services refused their customers by many white-run businesses. When the Columbia Theater opened on Indiana Avenue in 1910, the Recorder reported that "Indianapolis now boasts of two such amusement places run by colored men and both filling a long felt need." The proprietor promised that "every care is being taken for the comfort of its patrons."⁽¹⁴⁾

Black community leaders and newspapers encouraged such ventures because they often created more jobs for African Americans in management, sales and clerical work, areas usually not open to them in white-owned businesses. The Recorder celebrated Henry Sanders's success as a merchant of "ladies and gent's furnishings" and a manufacturer of uniform jackets and coats and pointed out that at Sanders's business "[t]wenty young colored men and women are employed in the various departments for clerical work and the manufacturing department."⁽¹⁵⁾ By the early 1900s a small class of black professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers, had also become established in the city.

African Americans in Indianapolis, however, could often only find work at low-paying, unskilled jobs. Families had moved north so their children could have a better education, but many black

teenagers finished school to find few job opportunities other than as laborers and maids. One African-American resident complained,

What shall we do? Here are our young people educated in the schools, capable of doing good work in many occupations where skill and intelligence are required. . . . They don't want to dig ditches or become porters or valets any more than intelligent white boys.⁽¹⁶⁾

Skilled trades were generally unionized, and most white unions did not want to admit black members. A few predominantly black unions did exist in Indianapolis, including the Hod Carriers' and Shovelers' Unions. Baker reported that "the hod-carriers' industry was almost wholly in the hands of Negroes who have a strong union, with a large strike fund put aside."⁽¹⁷⁾ In 1901, when the Labor Day Committee invited the Hod Carriers' Union to march in the annual parade, debate arose because the African-American band that the hod carriers had hired for the event did not belong to the musicians' union. The Recorder pointed out that the band had made "repeated attempts . . . to join the musicians' union but without success," having been charged an exorbitant fee for membership, "a subterfuge for direct refusal."⁽¹⁸⁾

Most black workers had little job security, and as a minority in the city's population, many black newcomers also found themselves competing with white workers for jobs traditionally dominated by African Americans in the South, such as servants and laborers. Newspaper advertisements could specify what race the employer preferred, offering positions for a "good colored girl" or a "good white girl" to do housework.⁽¹⁹⁾

Similarly, advertisements for housing sometimes specified race, and African Americans were generally excluded from the newer subdivisions springing up on the outskirts of the city. For example, in Emerson Heights, platted in 1910, houses had a clause in their deeds that read "The grantee . . . agrees for himself, his heirs and assigns, not to sell or lease to colored people."⁽²⁰⁾ When African-American newcomers arrived in Indianapolis they had to look for housing in neighborhoods that already had black residents, and the growing black population remained in the older parts of the city, while white residents could spread out to the suburbs. All the wards of Indianapolis had African-American residents, but by 1920, 48 percent of the population of Ward Five (bounded roughly by Tenth, West, and Washington streets and the White River) was African-American compared to less than 5 percent of the population in many outlying wards.⁽²¹⁾ In many northern cities, the housing open to African Americans was often older and in poor condition, yet because black renters had limited choice in where they could live they might have to pay higher rent than did white renters. Baker reported seeing a double house built for white people just on the edge of a Negro neighborhood and held at a rental of \$18 a month, but not being able to secure white tenants the landlord rented to Negroes for \$25 a month.⁽²²⁾

At the beginning of the twentieth century, some downtown neighborhoods were racially integrated, reflecting the "walking city" of the nineteenth century where residents lived close to where they worked. Within two decades, however, the population of neighborhoods like the area that is now the Ransom Place Historic District would have a black majority. In 1900 Ransom Place, just north of Indiana Avenue, was a predominantly working-class neighborhood where 14 percent of the population was black. Census data cannot tell us how neighbors got along, but the

manuscript census records do show that black and white households in Ransom Place lived next to each other in 1900.⁽²³⁾

The majority of residents, both black and white, listed in the census in 1900 had moved out of this neighborhood by 1910, a population turnover comparable to that in the city as a whole. In Ransom Place, however, as white residents moved out they were more likely to be replaced by black residents moving in, and by 1910 the neighborhood's population was 66 percent African-American. By 1920, 96 percent of the residents there were black. The population of the six-block historic district grew from 740 in 1900 to 870 in 1920. Many of the new dwellings built in the neighborhood between 1910 and 1920 were small, two-story, wood-frame flats or rental units that might house three or four families. While the neighborhood was still predominantly working class, a contingent of black professionals had also moved into the area. More likely to be homeowners, this emerging middle class included doctors Sumner A. Furniss, Henry L. Hummons, and Joseph Ward and attorneys Freeman B. Ransom, Robert L. Brokenburr, and James H. Lott.⁽²⁴⁾

The city's growing black population alarmed many white residents, who tried a variety of tactics to discourage African Americans from moving into their neighborhoods. In 1920 when Lucien B. Meriwether, an African-American dentist, bought a house in the 2200 block of North Capitol Avenue, his white neighbors, with the help of the "Capitol Avenue Protective Association," built twelve-foot high "spite fences" on either side of his property. In 1921 a Superior Court judge ordered that the fences either be removed or replaced by fences no higher than six feet.⁽²⁵⁾

Some white residents also resorted to intimidation and violence. In the first decade of the twentieth century, race riots against African Americans erupted in northern cities, including Evansville, Indiana (1903); Springfield, Ohio (1904, 1906); Greensburg, Indiana (1906); and Springfield, Illinois (1908).⁽²⁶⁾ Indianapolis never had a riot on the scale of that in Springfield, Illinois, where white rioters lynched two black men and burned out black businesses and homes, but the threat of racial violence still hung over the Hoosier capital's African-American residents.

In the summer of 1901, a gang of young white men, referred to in the press as "bungaloes," gathered in Fairview Park in suburban Indianapolis and attacked African-American visitors. The Recorder reported an incident in August 1901, the second riot that summer, when over 150 "bungaloes" gathered in Fairview, divided up into smaller groups, and then began to chase African-American visitors out of the park. At least a dozen black people were injured, including a Mr. Harris, whose arm was broken, and George Dawson, who was beaten with clubs and rocks. The park's police force could not control the mob, and the city police had to be called. Only three men were arrested; one was fined twenty-five dollars, and the other two were acquitted. Other incidents such as this led to the establishment of segregated parks in 1920, but even before that some parks had already become segregated in practice.⁽²⁷⁾ Ray Stannard Baker, in describing his visit to the city, referred to the "bungaloes," writing,

Although no law prevents Negroes from entering any park in Indianapolis, they are practically excluded from at least one of them by the danger of being assaulted by these gangs.⁽²⁸⁾

As the twentieth century began, African-American newspapers in Indianapolis both celebrated the progress made since the Civil War and reported on the inequities still faced by "the Race." The front page of the Indianapolis Recorder often offered contrasting articles. In the issue for April 27, 1901, one paragraph touted the victory of "Major" Taylor, the African-American cyclist from Indianapolis who had just defeated leading European racers in France. Another reported that the management of the city's Grand Hotel had announced its decision to discharge the African-American barbers on staff and hire white barbers to replace them. The hotel had already replaced the black bellhops several weeks earlier.

In neighborhoods like Ransom Place, black and white families lived next door to each other as the century began, but by 1920, most of the black residents of Ransom Place had no white neighbors. By the 1920s, some white residents of Indianapolis would also make it clear that they did not want any black neighbors. A city ordinance passed in the spring of 1926 made it illegal for a person to move into a neighborhood whose current residents were primarily of a different race without the consent of a majority of residents of the opposite race. In November 1926 the Marion County Circuit Court declared the legislation unconstitutional.⁽²⁹⁾

After the court decision in 1926, the Recorder noted that "[q]uite a few white persons also are to be thanked and congratulated for moral and financial assistance" in overturning the ordinance, indicating that not all white residents of Indianapolis supported segregation.⁽³⁰⁾ In Indiana in the 1920s, however, the Ku Klux Klan would rise to power, gaining widespread support and political influence. Active Klan recruitment began in the state in 1921, and by 1925, more than 25 percent of the native-born white men in Marion County had become members.⁽³¹⁾ Throughout the early twentieth century African Americans living in Indianapolis remained aware of the threat of racial violence not only in the city, as shown by incidents such as the attacks at Fairview Park, but also across the state and the country. In response to prejudice and racism, many African Americans did their best to create a positive environment for themselves and their children by building a community that celebrated black achievement through its newspapers, churches, and social organizations.

The opening of Crispus Attucks High School in 1927 would illustrate the paradox faced by the African-American community in Indianapolis. The growth of the African-American population since 1900 had allowed black entrepreneurs to establish successful businesses serving a predominantly black clientele, but this growth would also make the city school board's proposal of a separate black high school more feasible than such a plan would have been twenty years earlier. Although the creation of an all-black high school completed the segregation of the city's public schools, black students would now have African-American teachers who were often better qualified than their white counterparts but could not get jobs in predominantly white high schools.⁽³²⁾

The first two decades of the twentieth century brought many changes to Indianapolis. The growing prevalence of the automobile allowed many white residents to move out to the suburbs, while increasing residential segregation kept black residents in the older parts of the city, closer to downtown. As the African-American population grew, once integrated neighborhoods became predominantly black. By the 1920s, African Americans found themselves increasingly excluded from other parts of Indianapolis, but they also had a portion of the city, centered on Indiana

Avenue, that they could claim as their own. The many African-American newcomers, not just famous people such as Madam C.J. Walker and Freeman B. Ransom, would contribute to the flourishing of the black community, visible through its buildings, organizations, and businesses.

Notes

1. Population figures from Encyclopedia of Indianapolis, s.v. "Overview: African-Americans" by Emma Lou Thornbrough.
2. Carole Marks, Farewell--We're Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 1-18. Other works that discuss the effects of the Great Migration on Midwestern cities include James R. Grossman, Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Richard W. Thomas, Life for Us is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); and Joe William Trotter, Jr., Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).
3. Carolyn M. Brady, "The Transformation of a Neighborhood: Ransom Place Historic District, Indianapolis, 1900-1920" (M.A. Thesis, Indiana University, Indianapolis, 1996), 25-26.
4. United States Bureau of the Census, Negroes in the United States, 1920-1932 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1935; reprint New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 55.
5. Emma Lou Thornbrough, The Negro in Indiana Before 1900: A Study of a Minority (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1957; reprint, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 229n, 265.
6. Ray Stannard Baker, Following the Color Line: American Negro Citizenship in the Progressive Era (Doubleday, Page & Co., 1908; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 111.
7. "Noted Leader in Medicine and Masonry Passes," obituary for Sumner A. Furniss, Indianapolis Recorder, January 24, 1953; Encyclopedia of Indianapolis, s.v. "Purveyer, John A.;" "Furniss, Sumner A."
8. Advertisement, Indianapolis Recorder, March 4, 1916.
9. Thornbrough, Negro in Indiana Before 1900, 395-396.
10. Grossman, Land of Hope, 117-119.
11. ¹¹ Baker, Following the Colour Line, 112.

12. ¹² Ibid., 118.
13. ¹³ Thornbrough, The Negro in Indiana Before 1900, 260, 264n.
14. ¹⁴ Indianapolis Recorder, April 9, 1910.
15. ¹⁵ Indianapolis Recorder, March 3, 1900, January 22, 1910.
16. ¹⁶ Baker, Following the Colour Line, 131-132.
17. ¹⁷ Baker, Following the Colour Line, 136-137.
18. ¹⁸ Indianapolis Recorder, August 24, 1901.
19. ¹⁹ For example, see classified ads in the Indianapolis News in the 1910s.
20. ²⁰ William Gulde, unpublished research in progress on the Emerson Heights neighborhood, Indianapolis.
21. ²¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920: Population (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922), III:308.
22. ²² Baker does not specify the location of this example but Marks places it in Indianapolis. Marks, Farewell--We're Good and Gone, 145; Baker, Following the Color Line, 113.
23. ²³ Brady, "The Transformation of a Neighborhood," Chapter 2: "Residential Population Change. Population data come from manuscript federal census records.
24. ²⁴ Brady, "Transformation of a Neighborhood," 28, 42-47, 60-62, 80-82.
25. ²⁵ Indianapolis World, May 6, 1921.
26. ²⁶ Roberta Senechal, Sociogenesis of a Race Riot: Springfield, Illinois, in 1908 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 2.
27. ²⁷ Indianapolis Sentinel, August 26, 1901; Indianapolis Recorder, August 31, 1901 and September 14, 1901. Frederick Doyle Kershner, Jr., "A Social and Cultural History of Indianapolis, 1860-1914" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1950), 172-173. Fairview Park is now the site of Butler University.
28. ²⁸ Baker, Following the Colour Line, 124.
29. ²⁹ Indianapolis Recorder, November 27, 1926.
30. ³⁰ Indianapolis Recorder, December 4, 1926.

31. ³¹Leonard J. Moore, Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 49.

32. ³²Stanley Warren, "The Evolution of Secondary Schooling for Blacks in Indianapolis, 1869-1930," in Indiana's African-American Heritage: Essays from Black History News & Notes, ed. Wilma Gibbs (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1993), 29-50.