

# In Search of Freedom: Black Migration to Houston, 1914-1945

by Bernadette Pruitt

Martha Williams certainly knew hard times. Martha, a homemaker, occasionally worked as a washerwoman or domestic to earn extra money and make ends meet in a rural area in southern Louisiana. Her husband Charlie, like many African American men from southern Louisiana, earned his living as a tenant farmer and artisan. Frustrated with their marginal existence in the Bayou State, the pair left for the Houston area not long after the outbreak of World War I. More than anything else, the heightened call for cotton and petroleum goods during and after the war stimulated unprecedented migration streams from the surrounding countryside into the more urban, industrial centers along the Gulf Coast.<sup>1</sup>

Charles and Martha, like many newcomers to the greater Houston industrial region, hoped the area would offer them and their unborn children economic and educational opportunities, as well as greater civil rights and racial autonomy. In this sense, their decision to relocate to Alief, then a small town west of Houston, reflected an amplified social consciousness and self-awareness with regards to their future aspirations. The Williams family moved on to the Fifth Ward in Houston in the early 1920s after the births of their first two children. The Fifth Ward, originally developed for middle-class Whites after the Civil War, had become a working-class community, and it appealed to the Williams because of its close proximity to manufacturing firms near the newly-built Houston Ship Channel.<sup>2</sup> One

such firm, the Southern Pacific Railroad Shop on Liberty Road in the Fifth Ward, routinely hired African American men as both unskilled and skilled laborers.<sup>3</sup> In the decade following World War I, the family's conditions improved, and they eventually rented a home in the increasingly Black-occupied ward.<sup>4</sup>

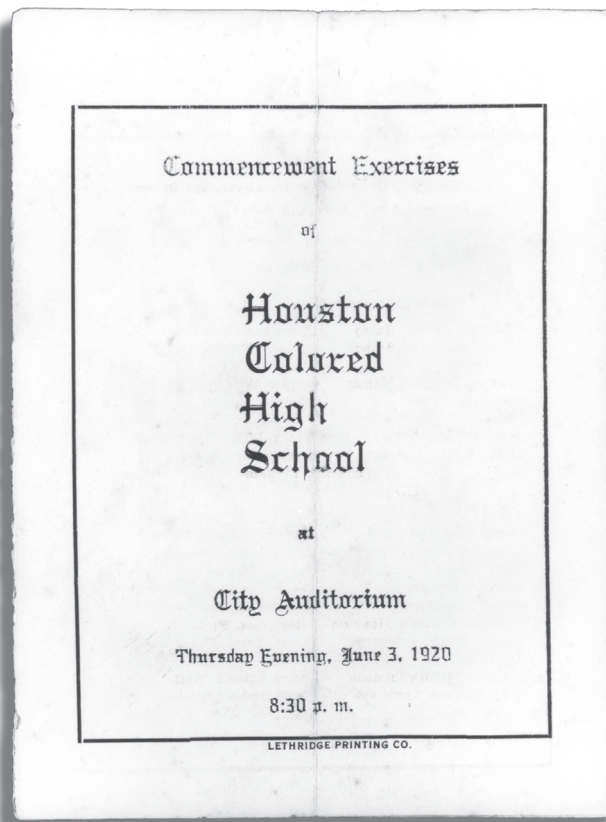
Like so many others, the family faced hard times in the Great Depression. The nation's worst economic calamity devastated the working poor, especially Black families like the Williams. The Depression took a heavy toll on the family, which included four more children by the early

1930s. Martha and Charlie soon separated. Charlie, like many unemployed and frustrated Black men of the period, left his family, went from odd job to odd job, and traveled to and from the countryside in search of temporary work.

His young wife, accustomed to working as co-wage earner and housewife, now had to support a family of seven on the meager earnings of a laundress. She and her children left their home on Cage Street and moved in with neighbors. The single mother worked on and off at a bag factory and as a cook for an affluent White family. Unfortunately, like many Black domestics

during the Great Depression, Martha routinely found herself out of work. Martha Williams and other Black domestics across the country increasingly had to compete for personal service work with Whites, Latinas, and other out-of-work Blacks—clerical staffers, schoolteachers, social workers, librarians, medical professionals, secretaries, sales consultants, and housewives.<sup>5</sup>

During her periods of unemployment, single mother Martha Williams applied for and received public assistance from the Harris County Department of Public Welfare and the newly-formed Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). In spite of her trying circumstances, wife, mother, and migrant Martha Williams remained proactive, steadfast, and determined to care for her family. Like other Black newcomers to the city from nearby eastern Texas and southern Louisiana in the first half of the twentieth century, migrant Martha Williams relied on kith and kin, Houston's expanding labor market, a sense of purpose as a wife and mother, public assistance



*Houston Colored High School—later Booker T. Washington High School—provided a source of hope, strength, and vigor for those African American students from the surrounding countryside who longed to complete their schooling.*

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and charity when necessary, a fervent spiritual purpose in the face of travails, and an activist resolve to overcome racial discrimination and overarching poverty. Through force of will and hard work, she made a home for her family in Houston.

## THE GREAT MIGRATION TO HOUSTON

Thousands of migrants like Martha Williams came to Houston in the first half of the twentieth century. Some 44,000 Black women, children, and men moved to Houston between the years 1914 and 1945, principally from eastern Texas and southern Louisiana.<sup>6</sup> Migration boomed from 1914 through 1930 before slowing in the 1930s because of the Great Depression and then expanding rapidly after the United States entered World War II in late 1941. Like their contemporaries who left the rural, small-town, and urban South for industrialized centers in the Midwest, Northeast, and West, migrants to Houston helped define the Great Migration and Second Great Migration of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

Between 1915 and 1970, an estimated seven million African Americans moved to industrial cities across the country from rural, small-town, and urban centers throughout the South. While many abandoned the South completely, others moved away from the farm to the city within the South, often moving first to nearby towns from farms, then on to larger industrial centers in their regions. Occasionally children and grandchildren of recent migrants to Southern cities sought better options outside the region and endorsed the idea of permanent relocation to Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay Area, Chicago, or Detroit. A good number, nevertheless, remained in the South. According to historian Earl Lewis, in the first few decades of the twentieth century alone, most Black migrants in the South moved to Southern metropolitan centers and not cities outside the region.<sup>8</sup>

For the tens of thousands of emigrants from eastern Texas and Louisiana, migration to Houston seemed a viable solution to a host of deteriorating conditions. Displaying the spiritual resolve and survival instincts of kidnapped West African immigrants turned chattel slaves, defiant runaways, and free/freed people of color, tens of thousands fled harsh economic conditions and deteriorating race relations in the rural and small-town South to seek

a better future. For many Blacks who came to Houston in the first half of the twentieth century, migration was a form of protest and activism, since they moved in search of socioeconomic autonomy, sociopolitical self-determination, racial advancement, and peace of mind. Although they could not be certain what fate awaited them in Houston, they knew all too well that the rural South presented very limited opportunities for advancement, extremely poor schools for their children, and an increasingly harsh caste system based on strict racial segregation.<sup>9</sup>

Only a few studies in recent years have examined how Black in-migrations within the South changed the character of places to which migrants moved.<sup>10</sup> Fewer scholarly works have studied the Great Migrations to urban centers west of the Mississippi River, to cities like Dallas, San Antonio, Shreveport, El Paso, Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and Houston that at times reluctantly absorbed the migrations of Black and Brown bottom-rung workers from Texas, Louisiana, and Mexico. The existing studies of Black migration out of the South tell one part of a complex story; further studies of Black migrations from the farm to the city within the South are needed to complete the story.<sup>11</sup>

## HOUSTON'S RISE AS AN URBAN MECCA

Migrants to Houston, like others who traveled north to Detroit, Chicago, New York, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia; or west to the San Francisco Bay region, Seattle, Portland, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Phoenix, relocated to a destination point that witnessed unprecedented population and industrial growth in the first half of the twentieth century. Houston's population of 44,633 in 1900 matched Yonkers, New York; Holyoke, Massachusetts; Ft. Wayne, Indiana; Akron, Ohio; Saginaw, Michigan; Lancaster, Pennsylvania; Lincoln, Nebraska; and Waterbury, Connecticut. Houston's 1900 population, however, paled in comparison to the Southern centers of New Orleans, Atlanta, Charleston, Charlotte, Louisville, Memphis, Jackson, Jacksonville, Montgomery, Birmingham, and Richmond.

Over the next five decades, population increase, capital investment, along with industrialization would precipitate Houston's phenomenal rise to the top as one of the world's leading manufacturing

producers. Houston by 1930 would become the largest city in the state and the second largest in the South; by 1940, the city had become twenty-first in the entire United States. By 1950, it replaced New Orleans as the South's largest Mecca; and the Bayou City also became the fourteenth largest in the nation. Without question, the city's population surge of 600,000 during the first half of the century was unprecedented for both a Southern city and to an extent, the nation as a whole. While Midwestern and Northeastern metropolitan centers continued to grow in population and size, unlike Houston and Los Angeles, most of the increases were the effects of outlying suburban growth, not annexation or population increase within the city limits. So incredible was Houston's population explosion that it ranked second in the nation in population growth, behind Los Angeles for much of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

The rise of a permanent workforce, profitable manufacturing industry, and commercial enterprises along the Houston Ship Channel and entire Upper Texas Gulf Coast (UTGC) refining region, along with the emergence of Dallas as one of the nation's centers of finance and business, and San Antonio as an expansive industrial center, all precipitated the phenomenal rise of urban Texas and the permanent decline of its rural counterpart. In 1900, 17 percent of the state's residents lived in cities; by 1940, the figure had increased to 45 percent, and over 60 percent by 1950. Although other Texas urban centers increased in population and size—San Antonio, Dallas, Beaumont, Port Arthur, El Paso, Corpus Christi, Austin, Galveston, Waco, Lubbock, and San Angelo—Houston's population explosion outdistanced these cities by almost eight times between 1900 and 1940. Equally important, in 1900, 82 percent of the state's Black population resided in rural communities; a half century later, 65 percent lived in communities defined by the Bureau of Census as cities. The dominance of Houston as one of the country's leading manufacturing and trading centers became evident by World War II as the Bayou City's population surpassed that of other cities in the Lone Star State, South, and entire United States. Migration to Houston, without question, seemed plausible for internal migrants from surrounding places.<sup>13</sup>





Bethel Baptist Church, 801 Andrews Street.



Rev. J. R. Burdett was born in Pilot Point, Texas, in the year of 1878. He is a graduate of Arkansas Baptist College, class of 1911. His property consists of a home in Little Rock, Ark. He was married to Miss Estella Waddy in 1905. Came to Houston in 1915 to pastor the Bethel Baptist Church at 801 Andrews Street. He is a member of R. F. C. and G. U. O. O. F. Pastor at Forest City, Ark., for six years. Missionary work four years. Joined the Baptist Association of Texas.

*Without question, the soul of Black Houston rested in its church homes. Like their counterparts across the United States, African American Christians in early twentieth-century Houston relied on their faith in an enormous way; they equally depended on their spiritual guide, the congregation's pastor.*

## MIGRATION AS A FORM OF ACTIVISM

While scholars rarely associate mobility with radicalism, the act does mirror the actions and attitudes of some contemporary Blacks who elected to thwart or challenge traditional codes of conduct. During the harshest years of Jim Crow, many realized their futile options in rural and small-town Texas and Louisiana, turned away from what employers and landlords expected of them, and gambled on migration to nearby Houston. The act of migration was one of the few practical options available to Blacks in the rural South who grew weary of the numbing reality of agricultural labor and brutal racism. Migration did not directly challenge segregation, but it did tap into the resolve of thousands of Blacks and encouraged them to resist the worst abuses of the Jim Crow system and find some way to make at least marginal improvements in their lives. As illustrated in the works of Luther Adams, whose writings on the Great Migrations to Louisville point out that in-coming migrants who remained

in Kentucky felt compelled to support civil rights, Black migrants to Houston through their decision to remain in the South in many ways indirectly and directly sparked later acts of protests in their children and grandchildren in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>14</sup>

Putting family ties first, these migrants felt compelled to remain in close proximity to those places they left behind. Again, they did not follow other migrants to the North and West, but rather, searched within their soul, and reached out to a community that would allow them easy accessibility to ailing parents, churches, siblings, extended family, and spouses. In rural and small-town Texas and Louisiana, these migrants saved their pennies, packed their families' belongings, walked on their bare feet, jumped on the back of wagons or pickup trucks, boarded trains and buses, or rode in cars, and moved to nearby Houston and other cities for

renewed prospects and opportunities. As newly transplanted Houstonians, they built on the self-help activism learned in their former rural and small-town communities, activism that on a daily basis, countered the painful burden of race in American society, activism that paved the way for new strategies to fight White racism later in the century.<sup>15</sup>

## CHAIN MIGRATION

Those dissatisfied with life in rural areas heard of opportunities in Houston from a variety of sources. They received letters from family and friends who had already moved to the city. They traveled to and from the city themselves. Migrants to Houston used a complex web of communication networks in their search for homes, employment options, schools, churches, social affiliations, and business associations. Informal employer/employee recommendations provided newcomers with jobs. Businesses advertised positions in local Black weeklies and occasionally sent agents to recruit workers. Migrants relied heavily

on the *Houston Informer*, a major newspaper written for the Black community that featured job notices, feature stories, and editorials that discussed current affairs and sociopolitical issues facing people of color. Railroaders, especially service personnel—Pullman porters, waiters, maids, cooks, and redcaps—provided commentary on Black life and culture in Houston. Churches also offered prospective newcomers perspectives on city life, jobs, schools, and political affairs. Church services, concerts, church-wide annual events, and statewide and regional conventions allowed for visits from the country to the city. Worship services, pastoral anniversaries, choral concerts, Sunday School District Meetings, and National Baptist Conventions allowed for both reprieves from the harsh realities on the cotton and sugarcane farms, and discussions on rural-to-urban migrations to Houston.<sup>16</sup>

Individual family histories illustrate the inner workings of a process that historians have called "chain migration." Landowner, schoolteacher, husband, father, and church member Calvin L. Rhone of Fayette County served many years as the LaGrange delegate of the Texas Baptist State Sunday School Convention (TBSSSC). An organization that fostered religious doctrine, cultural pride, self-determination and identity, leadership skills, spiritual growth, and intellectual fervor among Sunday-School superintendents and teachers within the Black Baptist faith, the TBSSSC regularly convened in Houston. Here, Rhone cultivated long-lasting friendships, including a close relationship with TBSSSC regional secretary W. L. Davis, also of LaGrange, a longtime personal friend and recent migrant to Houston.

Although Calvin Rhone and his wife of over 30 years, Lucia, loved the country life on their 300-acre farm in Fayette County, several of their children—Benjamin, Beulah, and Calvin Jr.—relied on their parents' friendships with Davis and others when they moved away from home, entered college, and relocated to nearby Houston. The Rhone offspring later used their own friendships and personal connections at Prairie View and Wiley Colleges, within the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), school districts where they taught, and in their many affiliations, and continued the cultivation of these relationships through their lifetime. As they

bought homes, joined churches, entered their perspective careers in education and longshoring, and had families, they too extended the chain and offered invaluable assistance to later newcomers—nieces, nephews, godchildren, family friends, and the offspring of former students and classmates—as they relocated to Houston. Many left the country to finish school, find jobs, and escape the degradation of humiliation and despair in Fayette County or other small cotton-based communities throughout eastern Texas.<sup>17</sup>

Migrants generally emigrated from surrounding communities in eastern Texas and southern Louisiana. Most migrants to Houston, not surprisingly, left places east of the Brazos River, particularly southeastern and East Texas rural and small-town communities that surrounded the oil refining region that stretched from the Houston Ship Channel to the Beaumont-Orange-Port Arthur Golden Triangle area and on to Lake Charles, Louisiana. Although some families relocated to the city in one trip, many did not. Some made stepwise migrations to various communities before finally arriving in Houston. Usually, men moved to Houston and only after a few months or a few years, saved their money and sent for their wives, children, and parents. Interestingly during the 1930s, migrants often took return trips to rural areas to try to earn extra money for their families. These return or re-step migrations also built on earlier seasonal movements between the farm and city. Migration streams from the country, which began pouring into the city immediately after Emancipation, built on and formed established neighborhoods inside the city's older wards and both incorporated and unincorporated communities on the fringes of the city's boundaries, places that would in time form the heart of Houston's Black community.<sup>18</sup>

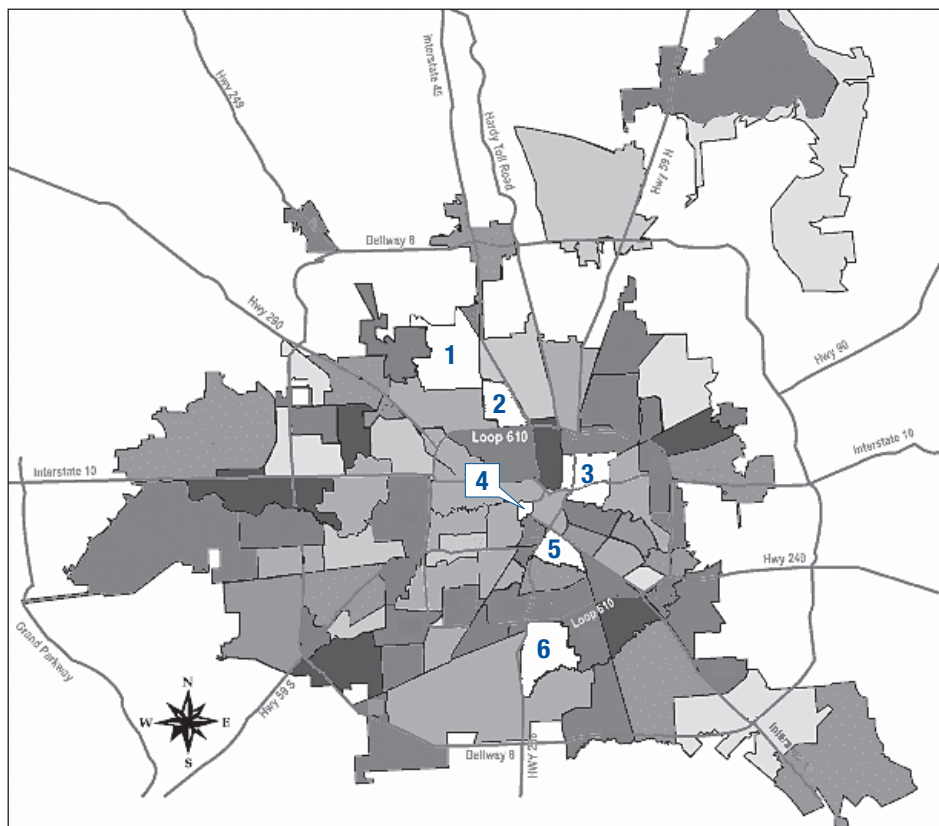
These communities included Freedmantown in the Fourth Ward, which had been created by former slaves after the Civil War; the Third Ward and the nearby unincorporated community of Sunnyside; Independence Heights, known to many as Texas' first all-Black city; Acres Homes, an unincorporated settlement of Blacks northwest of Houston annexed by the city in the early 1970s; and the Fifth Ward, including Frenchtown, a neighborhood formed in 1922 by southern Louisiana Catholic

migrants of French ancestry. In these areas of growing Black populations, cultural constructs of Blackness fostered pride, business enterprises, congregations, schools, a college, homeownership, networking, social clubs and organizations, union organizing, families, political astuteness, ethnic identities, class consciousness, entrenched racial segregation, racial awareness, disagreements, and occasional altercations.

Although the majority of newcomers came from small towns and farm communities in eastern Texas, nearly one-quarter fled Louisiana, especially southern Louisiana, the location of the nation's greatest concentration of Black Catholics. Economic need and natural disasters encouraged large-scale in-migrations to Houston among Louisiana-born Protestants and Catholics, including Creoles, in the late 1920s. Charles E. Lewis, a sharecropper in St. Martinsville, married Bertha Marie Thomas, a college graduate from Strait University—now Dillard University. Bertha taught Black farm children in the rural community of St. Martinsville—in St. Martin Parish—while her husband struggled as a sharecropper and on-and-off railroad employee with Southern Pacific. Frustrated by limited futile options in

rural Louisiana—especially as cotton prices steadily declined throughout the 1920s—the couple decided to migrate to Houston in 1927, after the Great Flood of 1927 precipitated large-scale migration streams westward from southeastern Louisiana. After two years of living with relatives and in boardinghouses, the couple bought a home in Fifth Ward on Bleaker Street. Louisiana migrants like Charles and Bertha Lewis, who moved to Houston for economic empowerment, relied heavily on their families, friends, cultural traditions, and community institutions.<sup>19</sup>

Amazingly, the sparsely-populated neighborhoods in these African American communities near sprawling farmlands, wooded forests, and endless prairies, prior to World War II often reminded newcomers of their previous hometowns and rural areas. According to high school and college classmates, fellow sorority sisters, and former educators Thelma Scott Bryant and Hazel Hainesworth Young, their Fourth and Fifth Ward neighborhoods were home to varying segments of the African American community—physicians, schoolteachers, businessmen, longshoremen, unskilled workers, and domestics. This diversity, according to the



*Map of Houston, TX, 2005. African American concentrated Super Neighborhoods for 1914-1945:*  
1. Acres Homes 2. Independence Heights 3. Fifth Ward 4. Fourth Ward 5. Third Ward 6. Sunnyside





*Houston schoolteacher, Pinkie Yates, the daughter of freedman and community agent Rev. Jack Yates, played a pivotal role in the art of community agency at the opening of the twentieth century. This photograph of Ms. Yates holding a book, exemplifies her lifelong pledge to Black educational empowerment.*

two, empowered schoolchildren, encouraged adults, and brought people closer together. Schoolteachers and music instructors, for example, tutored students away from the classroom; elders kept their eyes on children and grandchildren courting the opposite sex; the community observed the Juneteenth Holiday with festivals, parades, baseball games, competitions, and church musicals; and congregations occasionally honored special guests and recent newcomers with receptions and dinner parties. Young, for example, as a pre-teen, remembers the galas given by groups, including her church, Antioch Baptist Church, to honor the 24th United States all-Black Army Infantry that guarded the newly-formed Camp Logan (Memorial Park) before the tragic and regrettable August 24, 1917, Houston Riot.<sup>20</sup>

In an era of widespread segregation and discrimination, Blacks who left the countryside for Houston could not escape Jim Crow, but migration to the Bayou City did give them a semblance of hope and security in their self-contained, Black neighborhoods, benevolent societies, churches, schools, business establishments, night-clubs, and civic organizations free of White control. Most importantly, migration to Houston provided many African Americans with one essential pathway toward greater independence: steady blue-collar jobs.<sup>21</sup>

### **MIGRANTS IN THE HOUSTON WORKFORCE**

For experience in and exposure into the wage-earning world, farmers who migrated to the city usually relied on the temporary or seasonal migrations that seemingly resonated into training grounds for later, more permanent migrations. Black men, whose work performance largely built on seasonal employment options off the farm, primarily worked as unskilled laborers in manufacturing, transportation, commerce and trade, and personal service. They always earned the least in wages in all areas of the employment sector; worked in the dirtiest, most dangerous, and arduous of manufacturing and transportation-sector work. For a number of reasons, 80 percent of Houston Blacks worked in the city's unskilled labor force.

Although most newcomers trekked to the city for jobs and socioeconomic autonomy, compared to their White counterparts, they saw little in the way of upward mobility. They realized the sobering fact that the city's labor-force composition made them more vulnerable to economic contractions, underemployment, competition from both the small but growing Mexican labor force and occasional White labor pool, outsourcing, and other changes in the economy. Houston's workforce composition also revealed the material gulf between Blacks and Whites. For example, as the city's engineers, carpenters, bricklayers, boilermakers, and foremen, White Americans sustained the highest paying jobs in Houston industries. On the other hand, Houston industries primarily employed African Americans—and Latinos—as unskilled laborers. Blacks particularly fared poorly in professions outside industry and trade. In 1920 and 1940, White men held 97 percent of the city's male clerical positions; and for the

same years, they occupied 93 percent of the male professional positions. This material disparity between the two groups of workers, coupled with White antagonism and opposition to interracial union solidarity, brought to the surface the existence of the city's dual labor system that relegated Blacks to less pay and fewer socioeconomic freedoms for their families. One of the most telling indications of this dual workforce was a family's reliance on female and child labor in the African American community. While most White adolescents finished high school, the vast majority of Blacks did not. Most dropped out of school before their freshman year of high school. African American youths left school prematurely to give financial support to their families.

Census data, according to historian Earl Lewis, provide the most effective form of analysis on the African American workforce and the many challenges African American workers faced daily. The general rate of job participation in the Houston workforce among Black men describes both their easy accessibility to certain jobs and their overall vulnerability to underemployment. The job-input rate of Black men increased largely because of rural-to-urban migration. The Black-male labor force rose from 12,538 in 1920 to 21,543 in 1930, an increase of almost 60 percent. Over 23,000 men comprised the African American male workforce in 1940. Of the 21,543 African American male laborers living in Houston at the time of the 1930 census, almost one-third (7,050 males) moved to the city in the 1920s. Twenty-five percent of the 1940 African American male workforce (3,673 men) moved to the city in the 1930s. While represented in each general labor-force division, Black men more often than not found themselves occupying bottom-rung jobs. They made up almost 70 percent of the non-skilled manufacturing male labor force for the years 1920 and 1930. African American unskilled workers labored in four workforce arenas: industrial, transportation, trade, and personal service. In each, Black men found themselves limited to low-paying positions, jobs historically held by Blacks, while Whites labored in higher-paying occupations reserved for Whites.<sup>22</sup>

African American males found themselves unable to break this tumultuous cycle for two reasons. While White antagonism and racism in the workforce prevented African American occupational advance-

ment, this problem also partly reflected the varied composition of the city's economy, especially its reliance on ports and waterways, which depended heavily on African American longshoremen. Black longshoremen, for example, outnumbered their White counterparts by three to one. Longshoreman work, grueling and arduous, did not attract large numbers of White men after 1900. White men earned more money at oil refineries, steel foundries, construction companies, and in other segments of the transportation area. Like their Black contemporaries in Baltimore, Beaumont, Charleston, Galveston, New Orleans, Memphis, Charleston, Norfolk, Mobile, and Savannah, along with Mexican dockworkers in Galveston, Corpus Christi, Houston, and Beaumont, Black stevedores in the Bayou City remained disproportionately at the bottom rung of the manufacturing and transportation arenas, in part because of their close association with commerce and trade along Southern docks as stevedores. This numerical advantage did in fact give Black stevedores in the Bayou City socioeconomic and sociopolitical leverage over their White colleagues. Because of their numerical plurality in the industry and local ILA, Black longshoremen garnered the vast majority of the dock work along the ship channel (at least until the emergence of the Fifty-Fifty Plan, which guaranteed White dockworkers equal work along the channel), growing respect among a small pool of fellow White stevedores, and an excellent reputation in the shipping industry as efficient and exemplary workers.<sup>23</sup>

With the exception of self-employed business owners or professionals with all-Black clientele, the vast number of African American workers witnessed daily, relentless racism. The city's segregated workforce benefited Whites at the expense of Blacks by excluding Black workers from most skilled manufacturing jobs. But this also meant that Blacks faced relatively little competition for labor gang jobs, especially in the giant refineries and oil-tool manufacturing factories that grew along the ship channel. Although these jobs were the lowest paying positions in the large manufacturing plants, they paid well compared to many other jobs traditionally available to Blacks. In a few instances, Houston's segmented labor force worked to the advantage of African Americans.

Black women also labored in the worst-paid areas of the Houston economy, primarily in the personal-service job sector. They equally took a commanding lead in maintaining the economic survival of their families and the overall African American community. Again, Black males could not alone sustain their families and communities on their meager incomes. These workers needed the aid of their wives and sometimes, unfortunately, their children. The city especially allowed Black women greater accessibility to jobs, better schools for their children, and educational opportunities that sometimes allowed their entrance into the middle-class job arena. Slowly they challenged White hegemony on the job and engaged in race consciousness activities in general. Interestingly, Black women asserted a greater degree of autonomy within the African American family as breadwinners. Often they found themselves as the only working persons in the household. Because of the negative stigma attached to personal-service work, they held these positions without large-scale competition (at least until after World War II).

Women in the Black community also lost their husbands prematurely to death more so than White females; and sometimes husbands abandoned their families or frequently traveled to the country as

re-step or return migrants for work during the planting and picking seasons. Black women as wage earners maintained their responsibilities in the home as wives, mothers, and homemakers, cooking, cleaning, ironing, washing, tending to sick loved-ones, caring for husbands and small children, and enrolling older youths in school. These migrants, as co-wage earners or sole providers, greatly shaped the lives of their families and communities by ensuring the economic and social survival of their households. Latinas would not dominate this workforce until well after World War II. A few African American women, however, labored as unskilled or semiskilled laundresses and cotton-compress workers; and White females largely shrugged off unskilled work for skilled and professional jobs in manufacturing, clerical and sales, business management, public service, medicine, law, accounting, and science and technology.<sup>24</sup>

While the percentage of Blacks living in Houston declined as the twentieth century progressed due to increased rural-to-urban migration streams among Whites and Browns, Blacks represented a higher proportion of the Houston labor force due largely to the high volume of women in the workforce. They entered the Houston job market in disproportionate numbers



*African American men have always resonated a presence of strength and courage to their families and communities. In the middle 1930s, business owners and prosperous, middle-class non-business owners formed the Negro Chamber of Commerce. Their purpose—to formulate continued business prospects for African American economic leaders and foster racial independence in the form of consumer support for Black enterprises—mirrored the independent spirit of Houston's Black middle class of the post-World War I period. Migrants and non-migrants alike formed this important community agency.*



compared to White females. For example, in 1940, they made up 15 percent of the female population in the state and 36 percent of the overall Houston workforce for women. They were also a significant part of the Black workforce in the city. In 1920, they were 38 percent of the entire Black workforce for the year; and in 1930, they comprised 40 percent of the overall Black job force. For 1940, they equaled 43 percent of the total Black workforce. The number of Black women in the overall African American workforce rose to almost half of the total Black labor force by 1940. Black females, without question, in Houston insured the durability of their families and communities in tough times. Actually as expressed by historians Jacqueline Jones, Darlene Clark Hine, Kathleen Thompson, and others, twentieth-century African American women simply continued the arduous, painstaking, and often proud work traditions that their foremothers established in Africa and America centuries ago, while White and Mexican women in Houston for the most part only entered the workforce at the onset of World War I. Black females in the city and entire nation led the way among working women in the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup>

Only 15 to 20 percent of Houston Blacks, including migrants, during the interwar period entered the civil service, entertainment, education, ministry, medicine, dentistry, nursing, law, undertaking, publishing, barbering, hairdressing, and lucrative business ventures. The Black middle class gradually expanded after World War I, especially in the field of education. Black women made up around 15 percent of the city's female professionals during the interwar period; female schoolteachers, however, made up 70 percent of all African American female professionals. For migrants and established residents alike, these rapid changes spelled some economic growth for Blacks, at least until the dawn of the Depression. These socioeconomic influences would also pave the way for greater political representation, educational opportunities, and activism in later years.<sup>26</sup>

### SELF HELP AND THE ROOTS OF THE MODERN-DAY CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Even during the uncertainty of the Great Depression, activism, self-help, and community agency flourished. Increasingly, Black activism during the Depression

focused on charity and community agency. In spite of growing unemployment (which at times almost doubled that of Whites), limited local and federal welfare for indigent families, and continued in-migration streams, people in Houston's expanding African American community remained hopeful. Both longtime residents and recent newcomers gave to the indigent and needy in numerous ways. Often, African American groups gave to Blacks, Whites, and Browns. One Fifth Ward congregation distributed food to the needy of all races all day, while ministers on the west side of town only catered to Whites.<sup>27</sup>

Mostly however, Blacks helped Blacks: Alpha Kappa Alpha and Zeta Phi Beta Sororities held annual fundraisers for the elderly, physically and mentally disabled, indigent, and homeless, especially in the winter; Black organizations like the ILA, annually raised money for the city's private charity agency, the Community Chest; and churches all across the city provided needed resources for its members and communities. Pastor L. H. Simpson and the Pleasant Hill Baptist Church in Fifth Ward, for example, raised hundreds of dollars every year for the Community Chest; in later years, Simpson headed the local NAACP branch, unsuccessfully ran for the Houston City Council, and chaired the Colored Baptist Minister's Association for 30 years. A caring soul, he also opened a nursing home in Walker County near Huntsville.<sup>28</sup>

Women's auxiliary ministries of local congregations also formed soup lines in the Fifth Ward, the Third Ward, and Independence Heights. Christian women's groups throughout the city also collected perishable foodstuff from grocers and meatpacking houses. The indigent regularly received food, clothing, and monetary donations from neighborhood churches. Church caregivers themselves often faced harsh circumstances when their husbands lost decent jobs. Yet, these community agents assisted others in need during this period of extreme economic hardship. The efforts of ministers, civic leaders, women's groups could not, of course, end the Great Depression, but they could help people in times of great need.

The United States' entry into World War II ended the Great Depression, precipitating the return of large-scale in-migration streams from Texas, Louisiana, and Mexico. It also galvanized grassroots activism, activism that helped prepare the way for

the modern-day Civil Rights Movement. As United States defense contractors in the Houston area accelerated mass production, businesses and the federal government stepped up their efforts to hire out-of-work White farmers, men of color, women, adolescents, and immigrants for employment opportunities. Triggered equally by the massive decline of individually-owned farms, increased farm mechanization throughout Texas, and the newly-formed Bracero Program, which offered Mexican nationals (and Mexican Americans) migratory work on Texas farms, nearly 20,000 Blacks moved into the Houston area between 1940 and 1945 for jobs. Although migrants worked primarily as unskilled laborers, for the first time in large numbers, they predominated in the industrial workforce.<sup>29</sup>

Black workers, not surprisingly, experienced mounting racial bigotry in the workplace. Wartime vigilance, increased union organizing among Blacks, promises made by the Roosevelt Administration to curtail racial bigotry in defense plants, and a growing call among African American leaders to advance racial equality, all created a mood of resistance to entrenched racism. On February 14, 1942, the largest Black weekly in the nation, the *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper, initiated the "Double V" sociopolitical philosophy among African American journalists, civil rights activists, grassroots organizers, ministers, middle-class professionals, rank and file workers, along with others within the Afro-American community. During World War II, Americans of African descent demanded victory abroad over the Axis enemies of the United States, and victory over the enemies of Black civil rights and social justice in the United States (and abroad as well).<sup>30</sup>

Houston's African American community answered the "Double V" call in a number of ways. Black union membership reached 30,000 by the mid-1940s. Black laborers in defense plants more readily worked with Mexican American allies and filed lawsuits with the newly-created Federal Employment Practice Committee (FEPC), which attempted to halt racial bigotry in the form of union sanctions, wage differentials, intimidation, and firings. Many workers joined forces with the larger Black community in their fight against racial discrimination. Black steelworkers, for example, worked with publisher and community activist





*Shown are members of Alpha Kappa Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., c. 1942. Hazel Hainesworth Young, who taught Latin and was a counselor at Yates High School and active in Antioch Baptist Church is among those shown (second row, far left).*

Carter Wesley to combat racial segregation and discrimination in their industry. Industrial workers, in the end, however, largely fell short of their expected goal to eradicate workforce discrimination during World War II. While newspaper publisher and attorney Wesley worked alongside African American unionists to eradicate racial discrimination in what Earl Lewis calls the work sphere, civil rights activist and former schoolteacher Lulu B. White, who had migrated to Houston from Elmo, Texas, raised heightened public awareness in the African American community as her demonstrations, mass protests, and boycotts denounced racism in all segments of society, especially in the defense industry. The outspoken activist also lambasted politicians for their refusal to enforce FEPC compliance in the Houston area. It would largely take another generation before African American industrial workers could decisively dismantle stratified and codified racial discrimination at Houston-area industrial plants.<sup>31</sup>

Other strategists and strategies followed suit. Black teachers, unlike indus-

trial workers, won an immediate victory during World War II. Black teachers, primarily women, earned low salaries compared to both White colleagues and Black male administrators; they earned 30 to 50 percent less in salaries than their White peers with equal credentials. Equally troubling, Black teachers faced a hostile White-controlled school district that refused to distribute funds fairly. Fortunately, a vigorous letter-writing and editorial campaign led by the *Houston Informer's* Carter Wesley convinced the board to concede. Historian William Kellar refers to the triumph as the first real victory for Black civil rights in the city.<sup>32</sup>

One year later in 1944, the NAACP and Black Texans won a decisive victory over discrimination when the United States Supreme Court ruled that the Texas all-White Democratic primary violated the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. For a generation, African Americans in the Lone Star State had fought hard to secure their Constitutional right to vote. Varying segments of the community—migrants and established

residents, middle-class professionals and rank-and-file workers, Protestants and Christians, nightclub owners and ministers, and business owners and wage earners—utilized their self-help and community agency resources to channel an effective protest strategy that led to the re-establishment of Black voting rights. The 1940s, according to historians Darlene Clark Hine and Merline Pitre, stirred vigor, passion, and anti-racist rancor among rank-and-file and middle-class African Americans, so much that the collective and independent acts of protest-activism threatened the foundation of the status quo like never before.<sup>33</sup>

Although most Black wartime activists utilized the courts, media, mobility, boycotts, higher earnings, workplace politics, and organizing strategies to fight racial injustice in the 1940s, others used their checkbooks and business savvy to promote racial autonomy. The growing Black business class in Houston produced people who had reached levels of economic success that allowed them to provide funds for Black activism. The lives of Clarence and Anna Dupree illustrate how some Black migrants



*Named for Anna Dupree's beloved mother, the Eliza Johnson House opened its doors in 1949 for African American seniors. The nursing home represented another pledge for the loving Duprees, who grew up poor at the dawn of the twentieth century. Here, a proud Anna Dupree remembers all too well the importance of valuing the African American elderly, a source of strength in the community. Her loving grandmother, a freed slave, encouraged her continuously.*

to Houston worked hard to succeed and then used their wealth to help others.<sup>34</sup>

Born in 1891 in Carthage, Texas, a small community in Panola County just south of Marshall, Anna Johnson, the eldest of six children, lived a typical East Texas life as the daughter of sharecroppers. The family moved to Galveston in 1904, where Anna met her future husband, Clarence A. Dupree of Plaquemine, Louisiana. Orphaned at age seven, Clarence worked odd jobs at Galveston hotels and barber-shops. White customers cared for Dupree by providing him with shelter, food, and clothing. Anna and Clarence soon met, fell in love, and married in 1918. The newlyweds moved to Houston shortly thereafter. Clarence worked as a porter at the Bender Hotel; his bride worked as a beautician in a White beauty salon. Anna soon joined a more exclusive establishment in the city's River Oaks subdivision, securing a prosperous clientele among River Oaks and Montrose housewives. Even as the two struggled during the Depression years, residing in the Fourth Ward and living off Clarence Dupree's meager earnings, they managed to save \$20,000. By the late 1930s, they invested their savings in real estate ventures that provided important services to the Black community. They reopened the Pastime Theater on McKinley in the Third Ward, built the El Dorado business center at Elgin and Dowling in 1939, and opened a pharmacy,

men's apparel shop, and paint store. They also invested in the El Dorado Ballroom, a nightclub that for decades hosted parties, dances, and social events.

The following year, the Duprees opened the Negro Child Center on Solo Street in the Fifth Ward. Having been an orphan, Clarence realized the importance of a first-class orphanage in the community for African American children. Anna also opened the Eliza Johnson Home for the Negro Aged at 10010 Cullen Boulevard. The facility, named for her late mother, was home to ninety seniors. The community builders also donated \$11,000 to Houston College for Negroes and the construction of the Thornton M. Fairchild Building. They contributed annually to the United Negro College Fund; formed the first little league baseball team for Black children; raised money for Camp Robinhood, the first Girl Scout Camp in the state for Black girls; and encouraged others to donate money and land for other causes, including the South Central YMCA and St. Luke's Episcopal Church, both on Wheeler Avenue near Texas Southern University.

The Duprees and other wealthy Blacks in Houston formed a bridge between the poor and the well-to-do. They never forgot where they came from and bettered the lives of thousands of African American college students, seniors, club members, youths, church members, and the indigent. Their activism came in the form of both migra-

tion and community agency. Their protests rarely provoked criticism among Whites. Nor did they threaten their traditional White clientele by publicly denouncing Jim Crow segregation. To the contrary, they found opportunities to secure land and businesses within a segregated society and then to use their wealth to provide needed services for African Americans. Their work illustrates the process through which the Black community in Houston achieved greater racial autonomy by generating both the leadership and the funding needed for self-help programs.

Such community activism and self help initiatives accelerated important changes for Houston's Black community and paved the way for later forms of political activism. Activists as migrants, community builders, wage earners, and prayer warriors found themselves even more compelled to rebuild their homes, churches, neighborhoods, schools, and expanding institutions. Even during periods of massive underemployment and unemployment, activists put the needs of others first. The vigilance of World War II protesters essentially built upon earlier forms of activism; at the same time, these methods provided a secure footing for later acts of human rights resistance.

After World War II, Houston's bustling economy encouraged continued in-migrants from Texas and Louisiana for the next two generations. Although the economic recession of the mid-1980s precipitated massive layoffs and business closings in the oil refining and technology arenas, rejuvenated financial growth in medical science, computer technology, engineering, and natural gas later stimulated renewed migrations to the Houston area.

Indeed, by the last two decades of the twentieth century, Houston, for some, the nation's Sunbelt capital, witnessed two new demographic trends: College-age youths, unemployed adults, and retired seniors from regions outside Texas and Louisiana, principally from the Midwest and California, more readily relocated to Houston, reversing the original Great Migrations of their grandparents and parents to obtain quality college educations and jobs in the city's expanding service-sector economy. Black Caribbeans, Central Americans, Ethiopians, along with West African nationals, especially Nigerians, attracted also to Houston's inexpensive public and private colleges, low cost of



living, warm climate, and career possibilities in medical science, technology, engineering, and space exploration, found the Southwestern metropolis attractive as well. These recent internal migrants and immigrants from abroad have formed separate ethnic enclaves; forged enthralling cultural, familial, political, and economic alliances with and within Houston's larger Black community; and certainly benefited from and added to the Great Migrations of the past century.<sup>35</sup>

In the early twentieth century, Blacks in rural areas faced difficult choices in confronting the harsh realities of an oppressive Jim Crow system. Direct challenges to White hegemony brought swift reprisals, including death. But while White Southerners succeeded in erecting effective barriers to Black socioeconomic, educational, and political freedoms, they could not block Black migration. Through information networks within their families, communities, and churches, African Americans learned of better opportunities available to them. Many of them then acted, effectively using movement as a means to challenge White authority, undermine their socioeconomic powerlessness, and thwart their diminished status as impoverished, uneducated, disfranchised, and landless victims.

Black resistance to White supremacy through migration steadily increased in the first half of the twentieth century, costing individual landowners sometimes tens of thousands of dollars when sharecroppers and other tenants abandoned farms and contractual agreements. Many migrants left the South, drawn by the lure of industrial jobs in the Midwest and Northeast. But the growth of Southern cities presented another option, one that allowed migrants to stay in closer contact with their families and their hometowns. For several generations of Blacks in rural East Texas and western Louisiana, Houston, with its fast-growing economy, was one obvious destination.

This is not, of course, to say that Houston was an ideal place for Blacks to live; indeed, by 1950 it was the nation's largest Jim Crow city. Nonetheless, it was a place to escape the most severe conditions of tenant farming and to start a new life. Within the confines of segregation, the growing Black communities in Houston offered a degree of freedom and a measure of autonomy for Blacks who



*Successful businesswoman and caring soul Anna Dupree—along with her business partner and husband Clarence—opened a number of enterprises that brought renewed community spirit and agency to the city. One such business, the Anna Dupree Cottage of Negro Child Center, opened after World War II. Clarence Dupree, himself an orphan, made it a life's mission to facilitate improved services and resources for the city's African American orphan community. The center merged with the Depelchin Center in the 1980s.*

could find some refuge from Jim Crow in what amounted to small cities of African Americans in and around Houston. This was particularly true for the emerging Black middle class of professionals and businesspersons who served largely Black clientele. In Houston, Blacks built their own self-help organizations and read newspapers that reported on events in their communities. They sent their children to segregated schools that were poorly funded compared to the city's other schools, but were nonetheless among the best in the entire South for the children of the Black working class. The city also offered the fundamental building block for autonomy and independence, access to jobs. Even in the all-Black labor gangs of Houston-area manufacturing plants, Black migrants found employment that offered better pay, working conditions, and job security than the life of the sharecropper many had left behind in the countryside.

Blacks who left the countryside in search of self-improvement in the city often found what they sought: a better life for themselves and their children. Even those who found urban poverty to be a poor substitute for rural poverty at least had made a personal choice to try to change their situation. This was a fundamental form of activism, the resolve to do whatever was necessary to improve the conditions of life. Many of those who found relative

prosperity in Houston sought to help others in their communities and to begin to challenge the constraints placed on them by segregation. In this sense, the steady, quiet, and gentle activism and self help of Black Southerners in the early twentieth century smoothed the road for later, more direct and confrontational forms of civil rights activism. While contributing to Houston's growth, often with back-breaking labor, these migrants laid the foundation for a city that would remove at least the legal barriers to fuller participation by their children and grandchildren.

Ironically, while the Great Migrations, like the Harlem Renaissance, New Deal, World War II, and modern-day Civil Rights Movement, encouraged unprecedented societal transformations and major breaches in White supremacy, it failed to eradicate widespread poverty and structural racism for people of color. Some scholars today even suggest that the Great Migrations and other forms of passive resistance, known here as accommodation-activism, has perhaps hindered African American progress.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the Great Migrations of the twentieth century did, without question, open doors of progress to millions of internal migrants, migrant families, their descendents, African American communities, and contemporary migrants/immigrants of these communities. ■