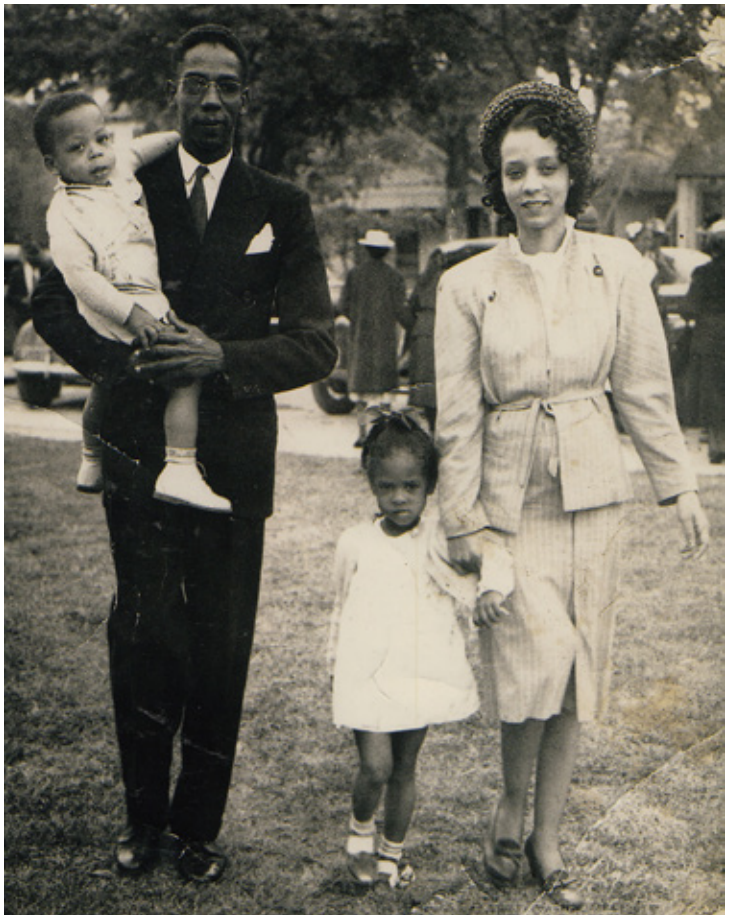
The Hayes Family of Third Ward: African American Agency during the Great Migration to Houston, 1900-1941

By Bernadette Pruitt

In 1897 Edward Wilbur Hayes left his home, Big Sandy in Upshur County, Texas, to attend Wiley College, walking sixty-two miles to Marshall, the location of the Methodist Episcopal school and Historical Black College/University, founded in 1873. His parents, former slaves and sharecroppers Peter and Caroline Hays, barely made enough money to feed their large family. They certainly could not afford a train ticket for their adult son on the Texas and St. Louis Railway (Cotton Belt Route) or Shreveport line going east. Hayes nevertheless entered Wiley that fall and for the next four years made his family proud, not only earning excellent grades but also putting himself through school. He graduated from Wiley with a high-school diploma, teacher certificate, and bachelor's degree around 1903, becoming, according to his son Robert Hayes Sr., the four hundredth Black Texan to earn teaching credentials in the state. For the next decade, Hayes taught students in a number of rural communities in the East Texas timber belt including Mineola in Wood County. In Mineola, Hayes met student Marie Fluellen, and later the two married. The young man also entered the ministry. To provide for his growing family, Hayes taught, pastored, and farmed, often doing all three simultaneously.[1]



Dr. Robert Hayes Sr. and wife Dorothy had three daughters and one son, along with two foster children, all college graduates. Their children include the late Patricia Marie Hayes, a registered nurse in Houston; and Dr. Laurie Fluker, associate dean of the School of Journalism and Mass Communications at Texas State University-San Marcos. The Hayeses helped raise two foster children: educator Artis Petterway, and UMC cleric, Rev. Dr. P. D. Phillips. Their birth son, Robert Eric Hayes Jr., held here by his father, currently holds one of the highest offices in the United Methodist Church.

Photo courtesy of the Hayes Family.

The family eventually morphed into thirteen, including eleven children by the mid-1920s, with the last, daughter Marguerite, born in Houston in 1925. Like many rural families of color, the Hayeses moved around often, from Mineola and Orange in Orange County near the Gulf Coast, to Marshall in Harrison County, and from Marshall to Bellville in Austin County in southeastern Texas, looking for financial security. The family's frequent relocations also reflected Rev. Hayes's responsibilities as a Methodist pastor who, at the behest of the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), changed congregations every three to four years. The migration patterns of the Hayeses paralleled those of others who moved from place to place as stepwise migrants, which allowed the travelers to move from one location to another before settling permanently in a community.[2]

As the Hayeses found it more difficult to make ends meet on the meager earnings of a technical professional and tenant farmer in rural Texas, Marie, the household's matriarch, in 1923 suggested that the family relocate to Houston to improve their material condition. In addition, the wife and mother believed African American schools in Houston were commonly superior to most others in the state and to rural White institutions.[3] Robert Hayes remembers his mother's candor on the subject, "'Not a child of mine will grow up in Bellville,' and she must have

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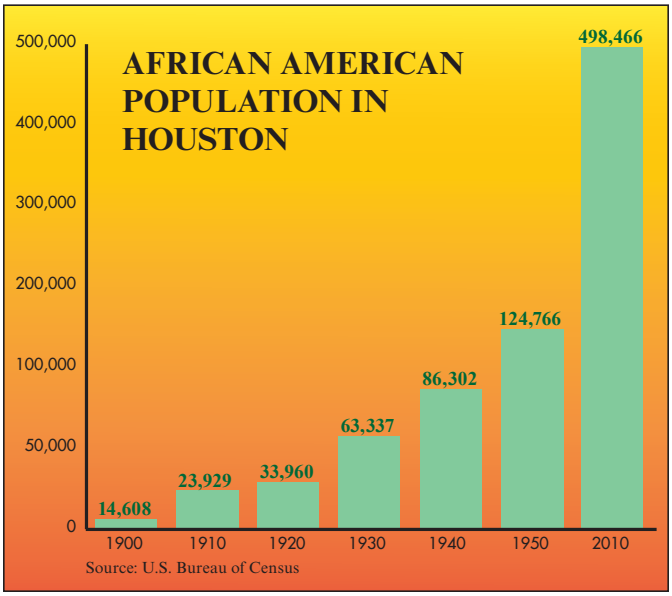
had some reason [to make such a statement]."[4] Marie Hayes was determined to give her children a better life.[5]

Between 1890 and 1970, an estimated seven million African Americans uprooted to industrial locales across the country from rural, small town and urban centers throughout the South, primarily for jobs but also for a quality education, suffrage rights, and civil liberties. Although rarely acknowledged, hundreds of thousands settled in southern metropolitan areas like New Orleans, Memphis, Birmingham, and Jackson, while millions more trekked to small towns, industrialized rural areas, and medium-sized cities throughout the South, including places like Houston that, occasionally, mushroomed into major metropolitan centers.[6]

Edward Wilbur and Marie Hayes. Photo courtesy of Hayes Family.

Drawing from my larger study, *The Other Great Migration: The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston, Texas, 1900-1941,* this exposé briefly summarizes some of the elements of the Great Migration to Houston, when an estimated thirty-two thousand African American women, children, and men moved to the city, principally from eastern Texas and southern and central Louisiana, for jobs and self-sufficiency. It reflects on the extraordinary Hayes family of Third Ward whose devout faith and resolve made them a symbol of the Great Migration, community building, and civil rights.[7]

Marie Hayes decided the family should leave Bellville immediately. Like many women who enjoyed their husband's unconditional love and support, the young housewife often made decisions for the family. Even if the couple did not agree on everything, Rev. and Mrs. Hayes recognized that they ultimately had to find common ground. In this instance, Marie knew their time to depart the country had come. For once her husband wholeheartedly trusted her judgement and put his family first, even before the church. This was not easy, especially for a man of God who loved the Lord, but he did listen to his wife. The family packed their bags and moved, even before finding a home, which eventually they did in Third Ward, first on Sauer Street, then Tierwester Street, and later on McGowen and Dowling Streets.[8] According to Hayes, "We saw a house [on 2515 Tuam and Sauer Streets] for rent and we didn't know who owned it. We just moved in."[9] A local congregation came to the aid of the struggling family until Hayes found employment. "Trinity East Methodist [Episcopal] Church members … heard that a preacher's family had moved in, and the next day they brought food for us … and we all joined that church," says Hayes.[10]



Rev. Hayes stopped teaching school altogether, preferring full-time pastoring, even though he earned very little. As well, the newly-formed Houston Independent School District more than likely required its teachers to have permanent teaching credentials, and with eleven children to feed and clothe, a middle-aged Edward Wilbur Hayes could not afford to continue his schooling if he did not have the credential. To earn additional income, he did seasonal work as a landscaper and cotton compress worker.[11] Robert Hayes points out, "My father's salary [as a Methodist minister] was never over $700 [annually]."[12] Including his cyclic jobs, Hayes only brought home $1,000 annually to feed his family, compared to the

nation's per capita income in 1929 of $7,100. The family continued to suffer as their situation worsened.[13]

Arduous job duties, long work hours, a poor diet, and stress compromised Hayes's health, signaling his untimely demise. Problems persisted for the family in the wake of the Great Depression, especially after Pastor Hayes departed this life near the Christmas holiday on December 22, 1931, at the age of fifty-eight, leaving his wife of nearly thirty years to take over his responsibilities as the primary breadwinner. Now a single parent, former stay-at-home mom Marie Hayes at age forty-seven worked for wages to provide for her struggling family. She cooked and cleaned clothes for White families. The older children earned their livings as well, laboring as domestics, errand runners, porters, kitchen crew, sextons, and so on. The Hayeses were determined to survive the Great Depression and live up to the expectations of the late Edward Wilbur Hayes.[14]

Amazingly, the children, even with their varied responsibilities, remained in school. Marie Hayes decided years ago that her offspring would excel academically. They did. The Hayes clan enjoyed their years at Frederick Douglass Elementary and Jack Yates High Schools in Third Ward. According to Rev. Robert Hayes Sr., "The teachers like Mrs. [Hazel] Hainsworth [Young] and Mrs. Virginia Miller who taught me Latin … were the heroes, nuns of our time. They really made us."[15] Music teacher Hazel Lewis especially made a lasting impression on young Robert Hayes, providing him and other Yates students with classical music training. Extraordinarily, the Hayeses witnessed all eleven children graduate from Jack Yates High School in Third Ward, from the 1920s through the early 1940s. Nine of the eleven entered college and six garnered bachelor degrees. One completed a master's. Without the family's decision to move to Houston, this would have been unfathomable; and, without powerful familial and community agency, these triumphs would have been almost nonexistent.[16]

Robert Eric Hayes Sr. followed in his father's footsteps. Even when the family lost their primary breadwinner in 1931, they remained committed to the ideal of Black Power—Black Intellectual Power—a concept born of his grandparents, former slaves Peter and Caroline Hayes.

Photo courtesy of Trinity United Methodist Church, Houston.

Similar to their contemporaries who left the South, the Hayeses, along with other new arrivals, sought improved lifestyles and racial autonomy. Houston reminded newcomers of what they loved most about the South, from its music, vernacular, and cuisine to the weather, topography, and sparsely populated neighborhoods that made community autonomy possible. Most liked the idea of remaining in the South to be near loved ones. Many had friends, acquaintances, or family already in the city, individuals who moved to Houston in the latter nineteenth century as freedpeople or as the offspring of former slaves. In addition, several migrants had lived in the city previously as seasonal, menial laborers earning extra monies for their rural families and, therefore, had familiarity with manufacturing, longshoring, railroading, or the service trades.[17]

The first faculty of Jack Yates High School in Houston taught Latin, Greek, French, German, algebra, geometry, history, chemistry, biology, physics, and vocational courses. This two-tiered approach to African American education allowed students to graduate with marketable trade skills, while giving the most promising students, like the Hayes children, the chance at a college education.

Photo from the General and Mary L. Jones Johnson Collection, courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS 0119-0015.

By relocating to Houston, and not Chicago, Detroit, or Los Angeles, migrants helped transform a coastal town into an international center, even as their offspring in later years left Texas for good. Houston's population grew from nearly 45,000 in 1900 to almost 600,000 in 1950, while the African American community rose from 15,000 to 125,000. It became the South's largest urban center by World War II. Houston's spectacular growth not only set it apart from other southern cities, but also helped explain why it became an important Great Migration destination for African Americans, European Americans, and people of Mexican ancestry. And even while the large-scale emigration out of the South reversed by 1970, return migrations in contemporary times have signaled a new phase of unprecedented population growth

in Houston and among African peoples: internal and international migrations spurred by the Great Migrations of the last century.[18]

Black internal migrants, including the Hayes family as well as immigrants from the Caribbean, moved to Houston during four distinct periods between the turn-of-the-century and the U.S. entry into World War II. Farmers, motivated by their earlier seasonal jobs in the city, relocated to Houston between 1900 and the start of World War I, when opportunities in manufacturing and transportation grew. Then during World War I, continued migrations, spurred by increased wartime production and waterway improvements, especially the construction of the Houston Ship Channel, precipitated a demand for laborers. Houston became the state's largest metropolitan center during the interwar period, particularly between 1918 and 1930, largely due to rapid economic expansion driven by transportation and crude oil manufacturing and sparked by population growth from migration. The 1930s also witnessed growth, even though a smaller pool of internal migrants partook, coming in and out of the city for work and government relief. Fewer numbers of Blacks uprooted to cities during the Great Depression, albeit those that did often participated in what historians call return migrations that allowed individuals to travel back and forth between the city and farm in search of reliable work and relief. Only the United States' entry into World War II marked the return to widespread internal migration within the nation, thereby signaling the Second Great Migration. Like Marie Hayes, Americans and foreign nationals saw migration to Houston as a way to move toward financial stability and away from socioeconomic, sociopolitical degradation.[19]

Indeed, in the century of the Long Civil Rights Movement, from 1865 to 1970, when African Americans and their allies steadily pushed forward a trailblazing social justice agenda for African peoples in the U.S., the Great Migrations to Houston served as a tool of socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and cultural change. The self-help concept of building communities, insulating families, utilizing cultural empowerment, and recognizing the art of self-preservation, commonly known as community agency, community formation, community building, or agency, at its core involved hope, self-reliance, and racial autonomy. Often community building began in slavery or in the rural South and spread to cities, even serving as a permanent bridge between the rural and urban South. The institutions, clubs, extended familial bonds, and friendships that stretched from city to farm provided newcomers with the semblance of sereneness, stability, and community. In addition, the new relationships that developed between migrants and established residents fostered both continued self-help strategies and racial consciousness.[20]

Migrants not only searched for autonomy but sought social equality as well. African American newcomers, utilizing migration as a tool of necessity and resistance, helped create permanent communities of agency, activism, and idealism. They opened schools, built churches, formed societies,

From the 1880s to 1920s corporate mogul Andrew Carnegie gave millions of dollars to build libraries, including hundreds of African American libraries and this one at Wiley College. Although the school library dates back to the nineteenth century, the campus constructed this building in 1907, and it had seven thousand volumes by World War I.
Photo from Carnegie Library at Wiley College courtesy of Portal of Texas. University of North Texas Libraries, Texas History Collection.

nurtured relationships, cared for the needy, and carried out key political patterns of protest, including the creation of the Houston-branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1918, the dismantling of the White Democratic Primary in 1944, the push for pay equity, and the desegregation campaigns of the mid-to-late twentieth century that helped sustain the larger African American community circles of the period, opening the door to mainstream desegregation and integration for most. The protest initiative of earlier twentieth-century migrants undoubtedly inspired later generations of action, thus aiding in the long civil rights struggle.[21]

East Texas migrants Edward and Marie Hayes pursued practical alternatives to rural poverty and hopelessness. Because of their actions and that of their own parents, the Hayes children excelled, even creating opportunities for others. Robert E. Hayes, the second youngest son of the Hayeses, followed in his father's footsteps, becoming a minister. The citywide high-school tennis champion entered Wiley College in the fall of 1937. With only $20 in his pocket, the freshman attracted the attention of the school's president who

One of the nation's longest-serving college presidents, Matthew Winfred Dogan headed Wiley College from 1896 to 1942. Wiley was home to the world-renowned debate team featured in the film, The Great Debaters.
Photo from "Dr. M. W. Dogan, Wiley College President," Wiley College, courtesy of Portal of Texas, University of North Texas Libraries, Texas History Collection.

The first African American United Methodist Church bishop of the Oklahoma Conference and Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference, Robert Eric Hayes Jr., followed a familial trend: attending a historical Black college and entering the ministry. Bishop Hayes remembered watching his father give his sermons and attempting to replicate his speaking style. As Jesus Christ washed his disciples' feet, here Bishop Hayes cleans the feet of newly-minted UMC pastor Jacki Banks.

Photo courtesy Holly McCray, Department of Communications, Oklahoma Conference of the United Methodist Church, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

gave him a job in the kitchen. He told the highly regarded Wiley College president, Matthew Winfred Dogan Sr., he would work for his tuition. Hayes's older brother Leon also attended Wiley but, unlike Robert, had a band scholarship.[22] Robert Hayes therefore worked his way through college as "a dishwasher, pot washer."[23]

An "A" student, Robert earned an English degree, with two minors in French and German, in 1941, making himself marketable as an interpreter, particularly as America entered World War II. Hayes then entered Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia, and put himself through school, once again, waiting tables during the school year and in the summer serving as a Home Mission Council chaplain for Caribbean immigrants working in New Jersey and Connecticut during World War II, which probably kept him out of the military during the war. He earned a second bachelor's degree in Divinity in 1945 but could not continue his formal education in his home state: "I couldn't go to SMU [Southern Methodist University]; they wouldn't let me in," he explains.[24]

Robert Eric Hayes Sr., along with his wife, formerly Dorothy Violet Willis, a Bethune-Cookman graduate and elementary schoolteacher whom he married in Palm Beach, Florida, in 1945, moved to Boston in 1947 to attend graduate school. Hayes earned his Master of Sacred Theology from Boston University in 1949 and an honorary Doctor of Divinity from Wiley College in 1969. He served in a number of capacities in the MEC (later the United Methodist Church, UMC), as pastor to several congregations and later as a provost to a UMC bishop, the first African American in the United States to do so in nearly two hundred years, according to the late Rev. Hayes. As provost, he spoke and preached to White congregations in Houston and eastern Texas in an attempt to prepare White Methodists for the merger of the African American and White Methodist Episcopal congregations in 1968.[25]

Next, the UMC asked Hayes to serve as Wiley College's president in an attempt to "give it a decent funeral."[26]The school was $6,000,000 in debt in 1971. To the surprise of many, Hayes later told Wiley's creditors, "I don't plan to close this school."[27] Hayes made the school solvent. He repaid creditors and raised millions of dollars for the private college. He remained president for fifteen years. Hayes Sr., who was born in Big Sandy in 1920, also sat on the board of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF). Hayes along with Houston NBC-affiliate KPRC held the first UNCF telethon in the United States in the early 1970s to raise funds for Wiley and other private Black colleges. Eventually, the Christmas holiday telethon became an annual affair known as the Lou Rawls Parade of Stars Telethon.[28]

Hayes and wife Dorothy had three daughters and one son, along with two foster children, all successful.[29] Although Dr. Hayes could not attend graduate school in Texas, SMU later trained his son, "My son finally went and finished from Perkins [School of Theology] at SMU."[30] Bishop Robert Eric Hayes Jr. has been a leading cleric with the United States UMC since 2004 and currently serves as resident bishop at Oklahoma City College. The leading bishop of the Oklahoma area, he oversees approximately 530 churches in the state as well as ninety congregations within the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference. He is the first Black to serve as presiding bishop over the two conferences. Undoubtedly, Bishop Hayes's parents and grandparents paved the way for their offspring.[31]

For the Hayes family, migration to Houston led to financial security, intellectual fulfillment, and generational blessings. A mother's instinct led the Hayes family to Houston in 1923. Educational attainment motivated Mrs. Hayes more than anything else. Although Houston schools for African American children often lacked basic amenities, up-to-date textbooks, and adequate financing, compared to single-room country schools, the city's alternatives offered young people like the Hayes clan and others a decent education and a fighting chance at a better life. This embodies the community spirit of agency and institution building that defined Black Houston in the generations that followed slavery through the climax of the Modern Civil Rights Movement. Without question, The Great Migration for the Hayeses and others signaled the birth of real generational change.[32]

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