During World War I, more than 500,000 southern blacks left for the North. Even more left for the West as well as the North during World War II. These extraordinary mass migrations—the first and second Great Migrations—significantly expanded the black populations in the North and the West. As a result, the black freedom struggle and the issue of black-white relations increasingly became a national rather than a southern regional concern. Indeed, these large-scale migrations profoundly altered twentieth-century United States life and culture.

The following letters are a small slice of a voluminous outpouring from southern blacks writing to the Chicago Defender, the most widely circulated black newspaper at the time, which vigorously touted the benefits of black migration to the North. The Defender’s spirited promotional campaign signified a modern reworking of the North Star legend of the slavery era: the North as the land of freedom and opportunity for blacks. Pushed to leave an increasingly racist and repressive South whose cotton-dominated economy was being devastated by the boll weevil blight, black migrants were pulled northward by the lure of wartime jobs and the dream of a better life generally, including better educational opportunities. Unfortunately, as most would soon learn, by various measures blacks might be relatively better off in the North, but it was certainly no haven. There, too, they faced institutionalized as well as interpersonal patterns of prejudice and discrimination.

These letters speak to the migrants' most basic concerns. Why do you think the vast majority of blacks remained in the South? Do you see the first Great Migration as a form of resistance? What do you see as the major ramifications for the black civil rights struggle of the first Great Migration?

LEXINGTON, MISS., May 12–17.

My dear Mr. H——:— I am writing to you for some information and assistance if you can give it.

I am a young man and am disable, in a very great degree, to do hard manual labor. I was educated at Alcorn College and have been teaching a few years: but ah: me the Superintendent under whom we poor colored teachers have to teach cares less for a colored man than he does for the vilest beast. I am compelled to teach 150 children without any assistance and receives only $27.00 a month, the white with 30 get $100.

I am so sick I am so tired of such conditions that I sometime think that life for me is not worth while and most eminently believe with Patrick Henry “Give me liberty or give me death.” If I was a strong able bodied man I would have gone from here long ago, but this handicaps me and, I must make inquiries before I leap.

Mr. H——, do you think you can assist me to a position I am good at stenography typewriting and bookkeeping or any kind of work not to rough or heavy. I am 4 feet 6 in high and weigh 105 pounds.

I will gladly give any other information you may desire and will greatly appreciate any assistance you may render me.

SELMA, ALA., May 19, 1917.

Dear Sir: I am a reader of the Chicago Defender I think it is one of the Most Wonderful Papers of our race printed. Sirs I am writeing to see if You all will please get me a job. And Sir I can wash dishes, wash iron nursing work in groceries and dry good stores. Just any of these I can do. Sir, who so ever you get the job from please tell them to send me a ticket and I will pay them. When I get their as I have not got enough money to pay my way. I am a girl of 17 years old and in the 8 grade at Knox Academy School. But on account of not having money enough I had to stop school. Sir I will thank you all with all my heart. May God Bless you all. Please answer in return mail.

MOBILE, ALA., May 11, 1917.

Dear sir and brother: on last Sunday I addressed you a letter asking you for information and I have received no answer. but we would like to know