

The Great Migration and Education

Tonia Cansler-Meredith

Faculty Introduction

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Author Tonia Merideth reconstructs the history of school desegregation and faculty desegregation in her hometown of Beloit, Wisconsin, in the tumultuous 1960s. Instead of tackling the proverbial school desegregation narrative involving southern resistance, terror, and exacerbated Black residents, Tonia's story recalls the experiences of her former schoolteachers who relocated to the Midwestern industrial city for teaching positions. Recruited by the Beloit school district in the late 1960s, the Lane College students of Tennessee partook in the Second Great Migration and took their place in history. Relying on an impressive number of primary documents, including court cases, yearbooks, census data, newspapers and magazines, photographs, and interviews, this student produced an impressive paper, bringing to the forefront unknown protagonists who felt compelled to move their new community toward social justice.

Abstract

At the turn of the century, World War I created a demand for a labor work force. Labor recruiters looked to the South for a worker class desperate to escape the Jim Crow laws of the South. Between 1910 and 1970, millions of African Americans left their homes in the South. Historians refer to this movement as the Great Migration. Although these migrants welcomed a new beginning, they could not escape segregation, especially in the school systems. This research paper documents the fight for equality in education leading up to the *Brown v Board of Education* of 1954 decision and its aftermath. Documenting the journey of a group of education majors recruited from Tennessee, it exposes the inequities that existed in education and the fight to destroy segregation. Future research will involve compiling data to determine the impact of the movement on this community and other communities at large. Further research will be conducted to determine if the Brown decision eliminated segregation.

Since the biblical Exodus of the Old Testament, diaspora, immigration, and migration have served as major themes in the history of oppressed people worldwide. African and African descent peoples, including victims of international slave trades, have especially seen migration as an important form of resistance to discrimination. Tens of thousands of American slaves, for example, escaped bondage by means of the Underground Railroad for freedom to northern and southern destinations. Emancipation also led to migrations, albeit voluntary movements without fear of punishment comprised these treks, mostly

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treks to southern towns and cities that have continued to this day. Then with the start of WWI, factories in the North began looking for reliable labor forces in the wake of huge worker shortages due to military service at home, abroad, and thereby the disappearance of potential European immigrants. Between 1910 and 1970, nearly seven million African Americans, mostly the descendants of freedpeople, left the South and the cruelty of Jim Crow laws and racial poverty meant to keep them in fear and servitude. Historians refer to this as The Great Migration. Beginning right before the nation's entry into WWI and continuing for the next sixty years, this Black diaspora would continue to pour out of the South and into the northern and western regions of the United States. Several million also remained in the South, moving instead to the urban South. Transplanting their customs and traditions, they changed the fabric of the nation culturally, spiritually, and politically.¹

Their contributions as wage earners, professionals, and activists resulted in landmark court cases and legislation including the *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954)² and Civil Rights Act of 1964.³ Beginning with these important landmark decisions and legislation, the federal government moved in the direction of banning racial discrimination of all kinds. The Civil Rights Act, for example, enabled the federal government to bar public schools from aid unless they complied with the mandate. Many northern states with growing African American populations were now woefully in need of African American

¹ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Vintage: 2010), 531.

² *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

³ The Civil Rights Act of 1964, Pub. L. 88-352, 78 Stat. 241, from National Archives and Records Administration, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/299891>.

teachers. As factory recruiters had turned to the South for workers at the turn of the century, education recruiters by the period of desegregation would recruit qualified African American educators.⁴ This paper examines one such group of future schoolteachers—education majors at Lane College, a Historical Black College/University (HBCU), in Jackson, Tennessee. Influenced by local civil-rights groups, Beloit, Wisconsin, a small industrial city outside Madison, recruited African American college students and recent graduates for teaching positions in their Midwestern community. Patterning themselves after the internal migrants of the Underground Railroad, these students “observed the time of their migration and went [n]orth.”⁵ Building on an array of sources, including oral history interviews, newspapers, court cases, and government documents, this paper documents these schoolteachers’ incredible journey into the Midwest and the desegregated teaching profession.

This research project builds on several interrelated historiographical schools of thought in the history of the Modern Civil Rights Movement and African American urban studies. First, it addresses school desegregation. While scholars for nearly a half century have extensively examined school desegregation in the South, historians, sociologists, literary scholars, and education experts in recent decades have also examined school desegregation in the North in the second half of the twentieth century. What makes this study fascinating is the author’s interest in addressing school desegregation in a smaller Midwestern city over a major metropolis. In addition, the work begins a fascinating conversation on the desegregation of school faculty and administration. In the South, this practice took place as districts closed African American schools after relocating African American students to White schools. Again, not surprisingly, most studies examine school desegregation within the South. This work however builds on those scholarly works that examine African American educators across the country who made history by desegregating White schools with White faculty outside the South. Moreover, this study gives credence to the fact that vibrant community agency existed in smaller cities across the United States Midwest, Northeast, and West decades before the Great Migration. This

⁴ “The US Office of Education Moves to Desegregate the Teachers, too,” *LaCrosse Tribune*, June 4, 1965.

⁵ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 183.

study therefore looks at racial autonomy in the Midwest, particularly in Beloit, Wisconsin, and the ways community agency provided comfort to newcomers entering the city as schoolteachers. Finally, the work places the Great Migration at the center of the Modern Civil Rights Movement and adds to the notion of long civil rights.⁶

The Fight for Desegregation

Centuries of migration had produced African American communities in large metropolitan centers like New York, Milwaukee, Chicago, and Los Angeles. These communities attributed their successful resolve to the southern communities from where they hailed as well as their determination to fight off racial injustice and social inequality. Southern states, for example, disenfranchised African Americans, segregated them, and treated African-descent people poorly in every aspect of life and culture, including the southern economy and housing market, on public conveyances, and in education. The *Plessy v Ferguson* ruling in 1896 had denied African Americans the right to equal education. Most Whites enjoyed superior schools, better books and superior school equipment and amenities. In her book, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Pulitzer-Prize winner Isabel Wilkerson notes the disparity in the schools of Whites and African Americans. Local school districts and state education agencies redirected government funds for African American schools to White schools, and African Americans had to make do with the leftovers, particularly when it came to tattered and outdated textbooks along with other learning essentials. In one school district in Monroe, Louisiana, a superintendent said, “[T]he money allocated to the colored children is spent on the education of the white children.”⁷

⁶ This paper builds on multilayered historiographical themes within African American history, mostly within the subfields of school desegregation and African American urban history. For a study that examines the history of school desegregation nationally, see Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1976; New York: Vintage Books, 2004). For a study that examines school desegregation in the North, see Davison Douglas, *Jim Crow Moves North: The Battle over Northern School Desegregation, 1865-1954* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). For a study that examines the impact of desegregation on African American educators, see Sonya Ramsey, *Reading, Writing, and Segregation: A Century of Black Women Teachers in Nashville* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2008). For a study on racial autonomy and the Great Migration, see James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and The Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁷ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 86.

Nearly six decades later in 1954, after years of court inaction, the Supreme Court overturned the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, unanimously ruling it unconstitutional. Although a tremendous victory for African Americans, the fight would continue for at least two decades. The ruling left biased southern judges with oversight and included wording that state legislatures interpreted as “not [to] be rushed.” State governments refused to comply with the federal mandate. In 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower dispatched the 101st Airborne to Little Rock, Arkansas, to protect nine teenagers enrolling in Central High School. In 1963, Alabama governor George Wallace stood in front of the doors to the University of Alabama to prevent Black students from entering.

Public school districts creatively extended segregation by passing state laws to prevent desegregation under the auspices of “protection.” They closed schools where Black children lived in close proximity to White schoolchildren, barred legal action against school districts, and intimidated

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African Americans wanting to sue schools practicing segregation.⁸ After a decade of solid resistance to school desegregation, the 88th United States Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This act enabled federal officials to withhold funding from segregated public schools. This provision allowed the federal government to thwart southern attempts to resist desegregation.

School districts in the North also tried to skirt the law by defining the quagmire as a “southern” issue and quietly remained segregated using surreptitious methods. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, African American teachers who had graduated from teaching colleges still could not teach in White schools. In 1939, the district agreed to hire just three Afro-American teachers in the school system by 1950. In “That’s When We Were Marching for Jobs,” author Jack Dougherty discusses the process used by the Milwaukee Public School system to keep the district segregated.⁹ First, most African-descent teachers taught at predominantly black schools. In addition, the school district only allowed African American women to work as substitutes as they had the support from

⁸ Wilkerson, 87.

⁹ Jack Dougherty, “That’s When We Were Marching for Jobs: Black Teachers and the Early Civil Rights Movement in Milwaukee,” *History of Education Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (1998): 121-41, doi:10.2307/369983.

their husbands, therefore, paying them a “family wage” and ensuring them an improved income on par with their White peers. Regrettably, these two-income families still faced underemployment.¹⁰ This allowed for a discriminatory pay scheme based on race and gender since the district paid them significantly less than male and White educators. Additionally, educators dissuaded African American college students from pursuing a career in education, opting to pay African Americans scholarships to attend southern universities rather than employ them in the district.

Members of the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) began to use their political pull to force the district to hire more African American teachers. African American Republican newspaper editor Anthony Josey and his assistant Bernice Lindsay approached White City Councilman Samuel Soref to remind him how the Blacks could tip the scales in close election races. The next fall the school district hired two African American teachers.¹¹ The

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district would continue to limit the participation of African Americans in the school districts until 1953, when Vel Phillips, a rising African descent lawyer and future City Council member, along with James Dorsey, began to challenge teacher placement practices. They contended that White educators did not prepare African American students adequately to reach out for higher education, with one telling Vel Phillips as a young college student that African American women were better suited for “cooks and maids.”¹² James Dorsey acknowledged that activists advocated for the desegregation of schools and the teaching profession. In addition, they felt African American schoolteachers may better prepare African American students to compete against Whites.¹³ Community leaders in Milwaukee continued to pressure the school systems there to comply with federal mandates. On June 17, 1965, Milwaukee attorney and state assemblyman Lloyd Barbee filed a federal lawsuit, *Amos et al. v. Board of School Directors of the City of Milwaukee*, after a year of high-profile

¹⁰ Dougherty, “That’s When We Were Marching for Jobs,” 128.

¹¹ Dougherty, 127.

¹² Dougherty, 129.

¹³ Dougherty, 128.

demonstrations failed to influence the Milwaukee school board to change its policies. A federal judge ruled in 1976 that the school system was indeed segregated and intentionally maintained by the defendants and the school districts.¹⁴ The fight for equality would always come down to those in the community who would be willing to put up the fight. Many members of the Great Migration did just that in their communities, including Chicago, Detroit, New York—and one very small community one hour south of Milwaukee.

Beloit, Wisconsin

Beloit, Wisconsin, is a small town founded on the Rock River on the southern border.¹⁵ Dr. Horace White arrived in 1836 and began buying lands. Soon, family and friends began arriving and building a community. City founders laid the cornerstone for Beloit College in 1846, two years before Wisconsin became an official state. Beloit was also a stop on the Underground Railroad, so it was a natural destination for many runaway slaves. Its industry at the turn of the century involved cigar manufacturing, but after 1904, companies in the area began producing devices for WWI and automobiles. One company, Fairbanks-Morse, hired southern migrants to the Beloit area. Fairbanks-Morse had increased production after the outbreak of WWI. In the spring of 1917, the company “brought hundreds of Colored workers to be employed at the factory.”¹⁶ In addition, they built Fairbanks Flats to house the rush of African Americans moving to the area from the southern United States, appealing to migrants looking for better pay and safer living conditions. The migrants that came to Beloit had similar origins. In Wilkerson’s book, Ira Mae Gladney’s relatives went North to Chicago, Milwaukee and Beloit, Wisconsin. Wilkerson notes:

¹⁴ *Amos v. Board of School Directors of City of Milwaukee*, 408 F. Supp. 765.

¹⁵ “A Brief History of Beloit,” *Wisconsin Historical Society*, July 24, 2012. <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS2393>.

¹⁶ “Coming Up North: The Great Migration; A History Harvest about Black Migration to Beloit, Wisconsin,” Omeka RSS, Beloit College, accessed April 10, 2020. <http://beloitdigitalarchives.com/HistoryHarvest/>.

For most sharecroppers in Chickasaw County, the Promised Land was, oddly enough, a place called Beloit, Wisconsin, on the Rock River seventy miles southwest of Milwaukee, which along with Chicago, because of the Chicago Defender and the mail order catalogues, would have figured prominently in their minds.¹⁷

In her autobiography, Rubie Bond recalls moving to Beloit when her parents were recruited to work at Fairbanks by John McCord, who lived across the street from them in Pontotoc, Mississippi. A friend of Rubie's, Velma Bell Hamilton, also moved to Beloit with her parents. She and Rubie attended college together.¹⁸ Chickasaw County resident Grant Gordon related the story of his migration. He wrote,

Before marrying, I taught public school in Chickasaw, Pontotoc and Lee Counties. On March 17, 1917, I left Houston, Mississippi, for Beloit, Wisconsin. Fairbanks Morse & Company paid my transportation. For four years I worked for F.M. & Co. I bought a 10 ½ acre farm one and a half mile west of Beloit in April 1920 and began truck farming and doing teamwork.¹⁹

Many of these residents, including Wilkerson's Gladney, recounted the reasons they left: the futility of sharecropping, fear, and the lynchings.²⁰

African Americans had been in Beloit since 1860; a census at that time reported 1,711 living in Beloit. By 1930, that number had jumped to 2,500.²¹ Although Wisconsin laws in 1895 forbade the segregation of public spaces, widespread segregation throughout the state still existed, including in schools. Rubie Bond, one of the migrants from Mississippi, actively fought to desegregate jobs, institutions and clubs within the city. She worked to integrate different facilities in Beloit, including the YWCA and Beloit Memorial Hospital. Rubie and five other women participated in a sit-in at the Kresge store on Grand Avenue after the drugstore refused her service. This was one of the first recorded sit-ins in the country. In the 1940s she organized the Women's Community Club to advocate for other groups including public school teachers and postal

¹⁷ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 243.

¹⁸ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 243.

¹⁹ "Coming Up North,"

²⁰ Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 533.

²¹ Bureau of the Census. Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Population. Part 1. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1862.

workers, as well as getting garbage disposal services implemented in African American neighborhoods.²² By the time of the *Brown v Education* decision, minimal integration in the schools had occurred, albeit without African American teachers. By 1960, the African American community had begun to push back against de facto segregation in the schools and the faculty. Demonstrations at school board meetings as well as riots that had begun to break out at the schools increasingly challenged the status quo.²³

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Barbara Hickman, the first African American principal in Beloit, recalls that time vividly. Barbara moved to Beloit with her family when she was eight years old. Barbara Hickman is the niece of Ida Mae Gladney, one of the protagonists for Wilkerson's books. She attended school in Beloit her entire life. After graduating college, she returned to Beloit and began working as a third-grade teacher at a predominately African American school, Parker Elementary. Barbara recalls the methods that were used to keep the schools segregated. In the 1960s, Beloit had "neighborhood" schools; most children went to school in the neighborhood where they lived. To keep African Americans out of White neighborhoods, banks would not approve them for loans for homes, basing qualifications off income. In Barbara Hickman's case, the bank refused to use her income as a teacher to qualify her and her husband for a home in the White neighborhood. In addition, the high school developed "career tracks" that kept African American students even more segregated. Since Barbara chose the education track, she was the only African American student in her program. She also recalls that Beloit's first African American schoolteacher got a job as a substitute first, because her husband was a mailman and had additional income, a common method used at the time to deny African American women full-time employment. She recalls that there was no support from the teaching staff for African

²² "Coming Up North."

²³ Barbara Hickman, "Beloit Public School System principal and administrator, interview with the author, 10 December, 2019. Beloit, Wisconsin, in the possession of author.

²⁴ "Last Tick for Segregation." *Racine Journal-Times*, January 3, 1967.

Americans to attend college. No one informed her of scholarships or student loans, nor did the guidance counselor discuss her future. Time after time schools turned her down for jobs during interviews while her white counterparts walked out of the office with contracts. She discusses her experience with discrimination and understood that as a

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Black female she had to be twice as good. The weight and pressure of all this seemed unrelenting. And for her, even with all her accomplishments, the memories of rejection are still with her at age eighty-two.²⁵

After Beloit integrated the schools, unrest in the black community surfaced, and black families protested at school board meetings due to the lack of African American schoolteachers and African American-oriented curriculum. The district called on Barbara to meet with White and African American families and soon became distrusted by both. She was called “Uncle Tom” for assisting the school board with placating the families. Many students began walking out of the classrooms in protest. The school board then made the decision to hire African American teachers. Barbara relates that for a time they went locally to Wisconsin and Michigan colleges, but there were very few candidates in those areas.²⁶

A chance meeting by a faculty member who attended a choir program at Beloit College presented itself. In attendance at the program was a group of Lane choir students who had come to perform. Soon, Barbara and several others were recruiting from Lane and other HBCUs in the South. The goal was to hire students in groups so they could have some commonality during the transition. In 1967, the school system recruited Hugo Henry, Virginia and George Williams, Annie and Johnny Odom, Booker Street, and Barbara Selmer, all education majors who had just graduated from Lane College in May of that year.

²⁵ Hickman interview.

²⁶ Gloria B. Anderson, “Schools Face Problems of Obtaining Black Teachers.” *The Daily Telegram*, March 18, 2020.

Lane College

In 1882, one of the nation's early Black church denominations, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, founded what would become Lane College in 1870.²⁷ Its top priority was the establishment of a school to educate the newly freed slaves following the Civil War. Bishop Isaac Lane purchased four acres of land for the use of schooling in the eastern part of Jackson, Tennessee. The institution held its first class in November 1917, and Bishop Lane's daughter, Jennie Lee Lane, taught the first class. So began the commitment to education for African Americans in the South and throughout the nation. Lane's students prepared themselves to enter the workforce as leaders in African American communities across Tennessee and the South and to meet the needs of teachers in the segregated South. Education majors from the HBCUs in the South by the Modern Civil Rights Movement began entering a new era. Increasingly, northern school districts recruited them to teach. This would be a unique experience for these students, as most of them had been raised in the Jim Crow South and had never attended school with White children. They did, however, come up in strong African American communities and congregations that supported and fostered their futures as college students and future educators.²⁸

For some of these students, this would be the first time they had been out of the South. They left with trepidation over the new home there were going to, but by then, Beloit had a solid African American community with strong leadership and churches such as Zion AME church. They became members of their communities, starting programs for schoolchildren similar to those back in the South. Breaking down the barriers proved to take a little work, as society still excluded African Americans from extracurricular activities. The Lane educators soon learned that the North and South differed in many ways: in the South, African Americans knew the lines of demarcation that existed; in the North, however, Whites often obscured or muted the lines, but the newcomers still recognized them.²⁹ Nevertheless, their presence in the community served to foster African American youths with a sense of pride,

²⁷ History of Lane College," Lane College, accessed May 3, 2020.
<https://www.lanecollege.edu/about/history-of-lane-college>.

²⁸ George Williams, interview with the author, 12 February 2020, Beloit, Wisconsin, in the possession of author.

²⁹ Williams Interview.

belonging, and community. Although segregated, African Americans in the South enjoyed the same themes of fellowships, although within their own communities, as did Whites. As jazz and blues traveled the highways to reach northern communities such as Harlem in New York, the Lane educators brought their customs and celebrations and incorporated them into the thriving African American community existing in Beloit at that time. The relationship with Lane College would continue; the college would soon begin recruiting students from Beloit.

Accomplishments

The migrants of the Great Migration achieved astounding accomplishments. Barbara Hickman was the first black to graduate from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and the first African American principal in Beloit.³⁰ Booker Street became the first African American principal at Merrill Elementary School. After many years of serving as teachers in Beloit, George and Virginia Williams left the community; George entered the school district in Milwaukee while Virginia became a professor in the University of Wisconsin–Madison history department. Barbara Selmer retired from the Beloit Public Schools system after many years of service. These educators left indelible marks on the students they taught and many of their students are teaching in the same district as their mentors.

The only known company housing built exclusively for African American workers in Wisconsin, the property has statewide significance because most metropolitan cities did not make accommodations for the workers and they were left to fend for themselves. In 1983, Fairbanks Flats was added to the National Register of Historic Places.³¹

Conclusion

African Americans who fled the Jim Crow South for opportunities in the North did not disappear into anonymity but became active members of their communities and raised awareness for social movements and fought for legislation. In the sphere of education, African Americans united to press for change in laws for equal education for their children, and equal opportunity for educators. These educators exhibited

³⁰ Hickman Interview.

³¹ Architecture and History Inventory, Fairbanks Flats,” *Wisconsin Historical Society*, January 1, 2012, <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Property/HI16574>.

tremendous courage in breaking down barriers and setting an example for the students they taught and the community they served, leaving a legacy of the Great Migration in the small town of Beloit, Wisconsin. ■

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Student Biography

Tonia Cansler-Merideth graduated in August 2020 and is currently pursuing her master's degree in history at Sam Houston State University. She is a member of the Phi Alpha Theta History Honor Society and a graduate teaching assistant in the history department. Tonia was inspired to conduct research on her hometown of Beloit, Wisconsin. Beloit was the destination for many migrants of the Great Migration in the Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabel Wilkerson. The book was assigned by her History Senior Seminar professor, Dr. Bernadette Pruitt. Tonia conducted broader research beyond her term paper on Beloit and the Great Migration, and plans to continue her research with the hopes of writing a book based on her findings. Tonia plans to graduate with her masters and teach history.