

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN – EAU CLAIRE

BELOIT, WISCONSIN AND THE GREAT MIGRATION
THE ROLE OF INDUSTRY, INDIVIDUALS, AND FAMILY IN THE FOUNDING OF
BELOIT'S BLACK COMMUNITY

1914 - 1955

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TO THOSE WHO MADE THE JOURNEY

ABSTRACT

The Great Migration of southern Blacks to northern cities in the first half of the twentieth century is a well documented historical topic. Southern Blacks who had grown restive of the Jim Crow south headed north to urban settings seeking employment and a better life. As a result of this process, many Midwestern cities such as Chicago and Milwaukee experienced drastic social changes. Another city which became a destination during the Great Migration is the small city of Beloit, Wisconsin. Early twentieth century Beloit was a lively manufacturing locale centered on Wisconsin's southern border. At the onset of the First World War, Fairbanks, Morse and Company was experiencing a manpower shortage. To fill the void Fairbanks, Morse and Company began recruiting southern Black men to work in their factory. By offering jobs and housing, Fairbanks, Morse and Company established Beloit as a destination for southern Blacks seeking to leave the south. The research will focus on the events that led to Beloit becoming a Great Migration destination. The role of industry, individuals, and family will be examined to provide the reasoning behind Beloit as a destination during the Great Migration. Overall, the focus will be on the factors that led to Black migration to Beloit in the first half of the twentieth century and the early development of the Black community.

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INTRODUCTION

When John McCord made the decision to leave his home and family in the south it is doubtful he was aware of the role he would someday play within the “Great Migration.” McCord, a native of Pontotoc, Mississippi, made the decision to migrate north after overhearing a conversation between his parents and a well dressed man by the name of Jasper Weatherall who moved to the north and was back in the Pontotoc area to visit relatives.¹ After overhearing the conversation between his parents and Mr. Weatherall, young McCord learned of the opportunities existing in the north that men could make two dollars a day. This got him to think about his future and ultimately at the age of 19 in the summer of 1912 he ventured north where he would meet up with Mr. Weatherall who had lined up a job for him in Savannah, Illinois.² Shortly after arriving in Savannah McCord learned of an opportunity to do well in Beloit, Wisconsin, so in May of 1914 he made the decision to move to Beloit and within a week was hired by the Fairbanks, Morse and Company (Fairbanks-Morse) as a janitor.³ Four years had passed and it was now the summer of 1916 and McCord decided to talk it over with his boss about taking a vacation to go back home to Mississippi to visit his parents when McCord’s boss inquired about where his home was and if there were more good workers down there like him and to bring them back. As a result, McCord would return to Beloit with eighteen single men who would all be hired at the Fairbanks-Morse foundry within days.⁴ This return trip to Beloit established McCord’s status as a labor recruiter for Fairbanks-Morse and laid the foundation for Beloit’s Black community. When John McCord made the decision to start a life for himself and

¹ Velma Bell Hamilton, “The Negro in Beloit and Madison” (master’s thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1933), 27-8.

² Ibid., 28.

³ Ibid., 28.

⁴ Ibid., 28-9.

head north it is doubtful he envisioned himself ending up in Beloit and influencing others to move to the small Wisconsin city centrally located on the border of Wisconsin and Illinois. McCord ended up in Beloit in large part due to industry, an individual, and family. Without family friend Jasper Weatherall, McCord may have never ventured north to Savannah where he would learn of opportunities at Fairbanks-Morse. McCord's story establishes why Beloit can be studied as part of the Great Migration of rural southern Blacks to the industrial cities of the north and exhibits the various roles played by industry, individuals, and family in migration to Beloit. The time frame of migration and the founding of Beloit's Black community will span the years 1914 through 1955. The migration from this time-period can be used to explain why Beloit has a large present-day Black community.

The historical context that Beloit will be studied within is the Great Migration of the early twentieth century. The Great Migration is the phenomenon which occurred between 1910 and 1930 when over a million Blacks left the south mostly for urban areas.⁵ It is estimated that a half-million of these Black migrants made their journey between 1916 and 1921.⁶ This thesis will examine and explain the factors of why and how Beloit was involved with the Great Migration. The focus will be on the roles played by industry, individuals, and family in attracting Black migrants to Beloit. These events can be viewed as the establishment of Beloit's Black community.

Historians have been documenting and studying the Great Migration since its conception. The majority of the research is focused on Black migration to large urban areas. Three books documenting Black migration to large Midwestern urban locales that have been consulted to explain working, living, and social conditions are *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial*

⁵ Thomas C. Holt and Elsa Barkley Brown, eds. *Major Problems in African-American History*, vol. 2 *From Freedom to "Freedom Now," 1865-1990s* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 126.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

Proletariat, 1915-1945 by Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* by James R. Grossman, and Kimberly L. Phillips' *AlabamaNorth: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-45*. All three books contribute to the knowledge of rural southern Blacks adjusting to life in the urban Midwest in the first half of the twentieth century.

In addition to the consultation of books as secondary sources there are journal articles and theses concerning migration to Beloit. Morton Rubin's "Migration Patterns of Negroes from a Rural Northeastern Mississippi Community" is a journal article explaining the migration of rural blacks from the town of Houston, Mississippi and its surrounding area, many of whom moved to Beloit.⁷ Black migration to Beloit has been the focus of four known theses' in the past by scholars. The first two completed, "The Negro in Beloit and Madison" by Velma Hamilton Bell and "Urban Adjustment of Rural Southern Negro Migrants in Beloit, Wisconsin" by Thompson Peter Kwame Omari are sociological studies. Bell's study compares and contrasts the Black communities of Beloit and Madison of 1933; it was completed as a Masters of Arts thesis at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Omari's sociological study completed as a dissertation in 1955 explains why Blacks moved to Beloit and adjustment to the community. The latter two completed, Tom Polaski's "The Impact of the Black Migration to Fairbanks, Morse and Co." and Zachary Sell's "Home Sweet Home: Work, Race, and the Making of Black Beloit" are historical analyses of the topic. Polaski briefly explains the impact the migration had on Beloit between the years 1915 to 1920 and focuses on this five year time period as the development of Beloit's social climate for the subsequent years. Sell's thesis completed in 2008 explains the development of Beloit's early Black community and the challenges presented. Sell does an

⁷ Morton Rubin, "Migration Patterns of Negroes from a Rural Northeastern Mississippi Community" *Social Forces* (Oct. 1960 – May, 1961): 59.

excellent job explaining the social problems that persisted for Beloit's early Black community. Both Polaski and Sell fail to explain within their work that the migration was the foundation for Beloit's modern Black community. The work of this thesis will contribute to the work completed by those who preceded and add to the increased awareness of Beloit's connection with the Great Migration and how it provides the establishment of Beloit's Black community.

The historical framework for Beloit and its connection to the Great Migration lies within the primary source, the Beloit Bicentennial Oral History Project, which are tape recordings of interviews conducted by Clem Imhoff in 1976. Imhoff interviewed individuals whom migrated to Beloit either for employment or where children at the time. This collection of oral history provides an intimate view of those who made history by making the journey to Beloit. Another primary source being consulted are the personal papers of Velma and Harry Hamilton. Velma Bell Hamilton is significant because she migrated to Beloit as a child and provides an example of someone who was able to come north from the south, obtain an education, and lead a successful life. She essentially serves as a testament to one of the goals of the Great Migration. Both primary sources were made available through the Wisconsin Historical Society.

PART I

THE LURE OF THE MIDWEST

The chain of events that led to Blacks migrating to the Midwest in the first half of the twentieth century consists of a variety of factors. Commonly referred to as push and pull factors for migration the three factors to explain migration to the Midwest, specifically Beloit, will be the First World War, Economics, and the social situation of pre-Civil Rights America. The basic understanding of these three factors and the themes within them provide a clear understanding of why and how Blacks ended up migrating to the Midwest in the Great Migration.

From a basic cause and effect perspective it would be easy to say that the Great Migration occurred as a result of the First World War due to the changes the war caused in the United States. James R. Grossman's analysis of the First World War's impact on the Great Migration sums up the situation perfectly. He states, "Before they could make this decision, Black southerners had to have an alternative that had been unavailable to Blacks before World War I – industrial employment. World War I and the economic boom that accompanied it created the conditions that made possible the entrance of Black migrants into northern industries."⁸ The onset of the First World War in 1914 brought on changes in immigration policies and the mobilization of the U.S. Military in 1917 resulted in openings of industrial jobs for Blacks in the north.⁹ "During the years from 1910 to 1914, an average of over 900,000 Europeans migrated to this country each year. In the following five years, the average fell to about 100,000 per year,

⁸ James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

due to World War I.”¹⁰ The combination of the First World War and changes in immigration policy paved the way for Blacks to enter the industrial workforce in the north. During this time, more people were employed in manufacturing and output increased with southern Blacks filling the void left by military servicemen and a lack of foreign immigrants. Following the First World War, immigration laws limited foreign immigration and increased the migration of southern Blacks to the north.¹¹ The First World War established legitimacy in Blacks moving north and was aided by factors unrelated to the war.

The economic conditions of the South when Blacks began migrating to the north offer an explanation as to why people left their homes for the promises offered by the big cities in the north. The conditions of the southern economy existed due to natural disaster and what Farley refers to as the “south’s failure to industrialize as rapidly as the north since their typical industry was agriculture.”¹² Blame can be pointed towards the leaders of the south for their inability to industrialize and choosing to carry on as an agricultural society. In theory one cannot accurately predict the forthcoming of disaster. Nature damaged the southern economy in the form of floods and cotton boll weevil, specifically in the summers of 1915 and 1916 which drastically lowered the price of cotton for ensuing years.¹³ Boll Weevil is an “insect about one fourth of an inch long that only breeds on cotton and feeds on the boll and does more damage when there is more rainfall.”¹⁴ The floods of 1915 and 1916 would indicate an increase in rainfall damage done by boll weevil. “The immediate cause of this movement was the suffering due to the floods

¹⁰ Reynolds Farley, “The Urbanization of Negroes in the United States” *Journal of Social History* (Spring 1968): 253.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹² *Ibid.*, 248.

¹³ Emmett J. Scott, *The American Negro, His History and Literature: Negro Migration During The War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1920. Reprint, New York: Arno Press and *The New York Times.*), 14.

¹⁴ Carter G. Woodson, *A Century of Negro Migration* (Lancaster, PA: The New Era Printing Company, 1918. Reprint, New York: Russell & Russell, 1969), 171.

aggravated by the depredations of the boll weevil.”¹⁵ According to Woodson the disaster of floods and boll weevil could have been prevented. He explains the United States Governments inability to fund the building of levees to protect against the river system that flooded fourteen times since 1874.¹⁶ All the natural disasters spelled doom for the primary industry of the south, agriculture.

The flooding and boll weevil which coincided with damaged cotton crops resulted in a financial disaster for the south. The result was unemployment for Blacks who had grown accustomed to working as farm laborers. Boll weevil infestation led to a reduction in the amount of cotton being grown, which led to less employment of labor since cotton needs approximately five times the amount of laborers compared to the cultivation of corn.¹⁷ Overall, Scott offers the most accurate explanation for the unemployment of southern Blacks preceding the Great Migration:

Additional unemployment for Negro tenant farmers was an expected result of this diversification. The greatest immediate disadvantage to negro planters and small farmers resulting from the failure of the cotton crops was the lack of money and credit to sustain them while the corn and velvet beans were being grown. It was for like reasons impracticable to attempt to raise stock, for there was no means of making a beginning, as a certain amount of capital was a prerequisite.¹⁸

Walter Ingram, one of the earliest Blacks to migrate to Beloit from Pontotoc made the journey because McCord talked to him about the opportunities in Beloit “the year the boll weevil was real bad and that it was a better opportunity to make a living and have money to spend.”¹⁹

It could be argued that the wages earned by those employed as southern farm laborers were low enough that it did not matter if one was employed or not. “In 1915, wages of farm

¹⁵ Ibid., 169-70

¹⁶ Ibid., 170-71

¹⁷ Scott, *Negro Migration During The War*, 15.

¹⁸ Ibid., 15-16

¹⁹ Interview of Walter Ingram by Clem Imhoff. Beloit Bicentennial Oral History Project Interviews, 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.

laborers in the South averaged around 75 cents a day.”²⁰ Even if a Black was fortunate to come across an industrial job in the south, it was still not much of a financial gain. Men could expect to earn \$1 to \$1.50 per day in a mill or shop while skilled laborers could make up to \$2 to \$3.50 a day. Women working in domestic service would earn between \$1.50 to \$3 per week as opposed to men who could make an average of \$5 per week in the same sector.²¹ The low wages and unemployment of the south are the primary economic factors which explain why blacks would be lured by the opportunities existing in the north. At the same time of rampant unemployment and low wages in the south, the word was being spread most notably by the *Chicago Defender* of the jobs available in Chicago with daily wages ranging between \$2 and \$2.50 for men and domestic opportunities for women paying \$2 per day.²² Likewise there were places rumored to “be fair in its treatment of negroes [Blacks] and to pay the standard wages,” such as the Fairbanks, Morse and Company of Beloit.²³

To go along with the good paying jobs that existed in the north, many southern Blacks thought it was a land where they would be socially equal and accepted. Moving north was seen as an opportunity to improve social conditions and escape the Jim Crow south. A tool used to create this imagery was the widely circulated *Chicago Defender* which portrayed the north as a land of available jobs, open schools, and civil rights while the south was one of oppression.²⁴ As a child Ben Gordon migrated to Beloit with his family in 1921 on the recommendation of his uncle, Grant Gordon who made the journey to Beloit in 1917. Ben offers insight as to how important the *Chicago Defender* was in the life of many Blacks during this time period:

²⁰ Scott, *Negro Migration During The War*, 16.

²¹ Ibid., 16.

²² Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 15.

²³ Scott, *Negro Migration During The War*, 111; this point is significant since Scott’s book was first published in 1920 and the statement proves the thought during that time, thus preceding the subsequent events and sentiments which occurred.

²⁴ Farley “The Urbanization of Negroes in the United States” *Journal of Social History* 254.

He read all the time (Uncle Grant) the *Chicago Defender* which was forbidden literature read behind closed doors, passed around from family to family as an underground newspaper...newspaper was something else, kept you on the ball. (Blacks) would never know what was happening in the country without the Black press; people in the south wouldn't know what was happening in the north.²⁵

Scott presents the argument that the inability for Black children to receive a fair education along with the treatment of Blacks within the court system contributed to the migration north.²⁶ The opportunity to improve their own lives and enhance the future of their children's life played a role in the move to the north. Overall, the social and economic conditions that existed in the south for Blacks can be viewed as an extension of Jim Crow laws. Early Blacks who migrated to Beloit during childhood such as Anne Harris, the sister of Ben Gordon, recall enjoying the integrated schools and how her Uncle Grant Gordon kept trying to convince her father to move to Beloit because the education was better.²⁷ Anne Harris recalls both her parents wanting her and her siblings to do well in school and her father constantly stressing to the children, "if you get education nobody can take it away...learn something from everybody."²⁸ In the case of migrating to Beloit the fear tactics of the Jim Crow south contributed to the migration north. The pure threat of violence drove a man out of the south in the case of Grant Gordon. In 1917 Grant Gordon left Mississippi and never returned after winning a land case in court against a White man who subsequently threatened to kill him.²⁹ Others did not let the fear and threat of violence drive them out of the south as hastily. Walter Ingram put up with the threat of violence from "five White fella's" who wanted him and warned him to leave town and never return for three years before migrating to Beloit on the recommendation of John

²⁵ Interview of Ben Gordon by Clem Imhoff. Beloit Bicentennial Oral History Project Interviews, 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.

²⁶ Scott, *Negro Migration During The War*, 18-19.

²⁷ Interview of Anne Harris by Clem Imhoff. Beloit Bicentennial Oral History Project Interviews, 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Interview of Ben Gordon by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

McCord.³⁰ Migrating north served as an opportunity to escape the threats of southern Jim Crow society.

The value of leaving the south was even instilled in the children. Rubie Bond migrated to Beloit in 1917 when she was ten years old and recalls the influence her parents had on her at the time: “as a child I was pretty sensitive to a lot of the inequalities that existed between Blacks and Whites, and I know that after we came here my mother and dad used to tell me that if I went back to Mississippi, they would hang me to the first tree.”³¹ The threat of violence and lynching served as an agent to drive Blacks out of the south. Moving north was essentially a way out and offered the opportunity to escape the Jim Crow south despite the uncertainties concerned with migrating. “As one New Orleans man reasoned the worst place there is better than the best place here.”³² As many would discover the north offered a great deal of hope and opportunity. With this hope and opportunity came an abundance of challenges.

³⁰ Interview of Ingram by Imhoff. BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.

³¹ Interview of Rubie Bond by Clem Imhoff. Beloit Bicentennial Oral History Project Interviews, 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.

³² Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 99.

PART II

WHY BELOIT?

Beloit's establishment as a destination for Blacks migrating north was a result of a demand for labor at its largest employer, Fairbanks, Morse and Company (Fairbanks-Morse). Fairbanks-Morse was experiencing a shortage of labor for a variety of reasons. First of all the company was invested in the production of a wide range of products such as scales, power equipment (e.g. windmills/steam engines),

and railway motor cars.³³ The production of gasoline engines by Fairbanks-Morse first occurred at the Beloit Plant.³⁴ As Sell stated, "Fairbanks-Morse's Beloit works engines were integral to the industrialization of agriculture – a technological phenomenon that contributed to the Great Migration."³⁵ Production of gasoline engines at the Beloit factory was not limited to customers within the United States either. Primarily due to the First World War, Fairbanks-Morse received



Figure 1. Map of Wisconsin with Beloit circled.

Source:

<http://www.greenwichmeantime.com/images/usa/wisconsin.jpg> (accessed 14 April 2010).

³³ *Pioneers in Industry: The Story of Fairbanks, Morse & Co. 1830 – 1945* (Chicago: Fairbanks, Morse & Co, 1945), 17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁵ Zachary Sell, "Home Sweet Home: Work, Race, and the Making of Black Beloit" (Bachelor Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2008), 24.

orders for the manufacture of machines from foreign countries.³⁶ Overall, the industrialization of agriculture was great for Fairbanks-Morse and Beloit.

In addition to the high demand of gasoline engines, the shortage of labor at Fairbanks-Morse was added another dimension. The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 changed the landscape of labor at Fairbanks-Morse. Changes in immigration policy and the mobilization of the U.S. Military in 1917, including troops from Beloit presented new challenges for Fairbanks-Morse, already experiencing a labor shortage.³⁷ Beloit also lost citizens of European descent who opted to return and fight for their homeland, further diminishing the supply of labor in the city.³⁸ The changes brought on by the First World War led to some creative thinking by a few select men.

Sometimes success comes as a result of failure. In the case of Fairbanks-Morse's efforts to fill their labor shortages this statement is true. When initially faced with labor shortages, Fairbanks-Morse looked south to Chicago. Charles Simmons, who worked for Fairbanks-Morse as a guide for new employees, explained how the company struggled to keep employees at the beginning of the war: "They recruited fella's out of a Chicago employment office on Canal Street. They were White straggling immigrants who wouldn't stay and wouldn't work."³⁹ Simmons remembers how Fairbanks-Morse "had so much work that they couldn't hire enough men."⁴⁰

³⁶ Bell Hamilton, "Negro in Beloit and Madison", 26-27.

³⁷ Robert T. Edwards "Beloit's Sons Go to The Wars: In Three Major Conflicts They Served Their Country" from *Beloit Daily News. The Book of Beloit, 1836-1936*. (Beloit, Wis.): Daily News Pub. Co. 1936.; detailed explanation of mobilization of Beloit troops during World War I.

³⁸ Walter Knight, "Minority Firsts" in *Sparks From the Flaming Wheel*, ed. Joseph W. Rhodes (Beloit, WI: Beloit Historical Society, 1984), 233-237.

³⁹ Interview of Charles Simmons by Clem Imhoff. Beloit Bicentennial Oral History Project Interviews, 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Since hiring men out of Chicago turned out to be a bust for the company, officials began looking elsewhere for a reliable labor source. “In 1915, of the 2,385 men employed at Fairbanks-Morse, six were Black.”⁴¹ It is hypothetical to think management at Fairbanks-Morse thought highly of the six Black men the company employed in 1915 because one of them became their primary labor recruiter. According to Simmons, John McCord was a “well-liked janitor who cleaned the main office.”⁴² As explained previously, McCord was planning on taking a trip back to Mississippi in the summer of 1916. Eugene Burlingame was the primary employment agent at the time and simply asked McCord if “there were any more good workers like you down there and if so to bring them back with him.”⁴³ According to Simmons, Burlingame was a “fair minded, good descent person.”⁴⁴ Thus was the beginning of a new career for John McCord.



Figure 2. John McCord, circa 1920.

Source: Koch, Lewis. “Up North: A Photographic Self-Portrait of the Founding of Beloit’s African-American Community”: photo of John McCord <http://www.beloitlibrary.info/?pid=126> (accessed 8 February 2010).

⁴¹ Sell, “Home Sweet Home”, 8.

⁴² Interview of Simmons by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

⁴³ Bell Hamilton, “Negro in Beloit and Madison”, 28-9.

⁴⁴ Interview of Simmons by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

The Lord's Work

Sending McCord to Mississippi to recruit men to work at Fairbanks-Morse was not a guarantee he would return with laborers. Essentially, the first trip to Mississippi was McCord presenting a novel thought, but how would those listening know if he was telling the truth. Back home in Mississippi McCord would spread the word that Fairbanks-Morse will pay “twenty-two and a half cents per hour and he would carry anyone who wanted to go back with him; yet no one believed him until he wrote Fairbanks-Morse and received a reply.”⁴⁵ With evidence of the jobs he promised in hand, McCord returned to Beloit in July 1916 with eighteen single men who would all be hired to work in the foundry at Fairbanks-Morse.⁴⁶ The policy of Fairbanks-Morse was that the men would have their transportation costs deducted from the first paycheck and if they stayed ninety days and completed satisfactory work, they were refunded.⁴⁷ Clearly the company was not going to let itself get burned again, as it did when they recruited the men from the Canal Street employment office in Chicago.

McCord's first trip was probably the most difficult as it was a completely new experience for him. After the first trip in July of 1916, McCord ventured south three more times to recruit men and would be accompanied by two other men whom had come back with him on the first trip.⁴⁸ Walter Ingram was one of the eighteen men who came from Mississippi after McCord's first trip. Convincing Ingram to migrate to Beloit was important to McCord for two reasons. Ingram recalls why McCord convinced him to migrate to Beloit:

He recruited me more as a baseball player because Fairbanks-Morse had a white team that always beat the Black team, I was one of the best baseball players he

⁴⁵ Bell Hamilton, “Negro in Beloit and Madison”, 28-9.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 28-9.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 28-9.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 28-9.

[McCord] had ever seen...I trusted McCord because I played baseball with his family, his pitch about Beloit was that there was better opportunity to make a living, go to night school, money to spend, people treat you better, and won't have to worry about getting lynched.⁴⁹

Besides being a great baseball player, McCord knew Ingram would be valuable because "he knew more men in Mississippi than anyone else;" McCord passed the message on to Burlingame and soon Ingram was joining McCord on recruiting trips.⁵⁰ Ingram was perfect for recruiting due to his background playing semi-professional baseball in Mississippi and "was well known and knew the ins and outs of the area."⁵¹ He also understood what Fairbanks-Morse wanted out of the recruitment trips. Ingram recalled that management wanted him to seek out "churchmen from Mississippi, good people, good men, absolutely no gamblers."⁵²

The early years of recruiting were very dangerous for McCord and Ingram. Many southern states had laws against labor recruiting in the south. Ingram recalls that his family did not want him to go south and recruit and that the law in the south was if a man was "caught taking labor across the Ohio River it was a \$500 fine and given as much time [in jail] as the judge wanted to give."⁵³ The Reverend D.W. Johnson who first started working for Fairbanks-Morse when he arrived in 1920 and worked there until 1974 recalled that "northerners were not supposed to go down south and recruit" and that "no strange White men were allowed [down south] and they'll kill a damn yankee going down there to get them niggers."⁵⁴ The Reverend Johnson's statement that "no strange White men were allowed" provides reasoning as to why Fairbanks-Morse sent the Blacks that they employed within the company as labor agents and suggests the 1910s and early 1920s were a difficult time to recruit employment out of the south.

⁴⁹ Interview of Ingram by Imhoff. BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Interview of Simmons by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

⁵² Interview of Ingram by Imhoff. BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Interview of Rev. D.W. Johnson by Clem Imhoff. Beloit Bicentennial Oral History Project Interviews, 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.

Fairbanks-Morse and their recruiters would be resilient in their efforts to recruit in the south. Luckily for the company and recruiters they had enough connections in the south to find ways around the dangers. Ingram recalls how he initially went to the Pontotoc area to recruit but would not go past Memphis on the following journeys: “I would write letters from Memphis to members of a variety of Black churches in the Pontotoc area describing available jobs at Fairbanks-Morse and wages offered; when the Blacks were recruited they were notified as to when they were expected to be in Memphis and what train to catch to Chicago.”⁵⁵



Figure 3. Walter Ingram and wife Daisy, circa 1920.

Source: Koch, Lewis. “Up North: A Photographic Self-Portrait of the Founding of Beloit’s African-American Community”: photo of Walter and Daisy Ingram <http://www.beloitlibrary.info/?pid=126> (accessed 8 February 2010).

⁵⁵ Interview of Ingram by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

Irony has it that Chicago was the gateway to Beloit for the Black men migrating for employment at Fairbanks-Morse considering the company failed in their initial attempts to recruit White immigrants out of the Canal Street area of the city as mentioned earlier. Ingram would meet the men at the North Western [train] Station and they would “take the back end of the train” up to Beloit.⁵⁶

The recruiting trips were a gratifying experience for Ingram. Through the process he was able to bring his baseball teammate and brother Jim to Beloit while developing a strong relationship with Burlingame, who even travelled to Memphis on one occasion with Ingram in 1917 to see a cousin.⁵⁷ Ingram was fortunate for the opportunity McCord had given him, and felt the “lord blessed him to recruit for the people’s sake, to help people prosper and that recruiting was the lord’s work.”⁵⁸

The spiritual awakening for Ingram did not make him immune to the dangers of recruiting though. Ingram ended up witnessing something no one should ever have to observe while having his families worst fears flash before his eyes. He was in Memphis recruiting when he witnessed a man get lynched at a train station, recalling that there was “a mob of men and some women howling like wolves.”⁵⁹ This was the last recruiting trip for Ingram.

A common misconception of the Great Migration is it was only Blacks who headed north for the employment opportunities. In the case of Beloit, this was not always true. Charles Simmons recalled “the poor White families moved also, not with the group but followed Blacks up.”⁶⁰ The Reverend Johnson, who recruited briefly in 1922 while working for a railroad company when Fairbanks-Morse experienced a plant shut down, added that he “recruited White

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Interview of Simmons by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

men and told them places to go in the north such as Beloit.”⁶¹ Although not directly recruited by Fairbanks-Morse to work, it is not surprising that Whites would join in the migration effort seeking work in the north. After-all the phenomenon was not limited to Blacks, but rather Blacks were sought after as a “cheap source of labor, saving 5 to 6 cents per hour per man” according to Lorenzo Grady.⁶²

Fairbanks-Morse’s labor shortages caused Beloit’s establishment as a Great Migration destination. It is truly coincidental that McCord had made his way to Beloit and ultimately ended up serving as the first labor recruiter in the company’s efforts to recruit southern Blacks. The efforts of Fairbanks-Morse caused more than just men coming to work in their factory; the migration to Beloit was a family affair.



Figure 4. Reverend D.W. Johnson

Source: Koch, Lewis. “Up North: A Photographic Self-Portrait of the Founding of Beloit’s African-American Community”: photo of Rev. Johnson <http://www.beloitlibrary.info/?pid=126> (accessed 8 February 2010).

⁶¹ Interview of Rev. Johnson by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

⁶² Interview of Lorenzo Grady by Clem Imhoff. Beloit Bicentennial Oral History Project Interviews, 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.

PART III

ESTABLISHING A COMMUNITY

The policy of Fairbanks-Morse was to pay for the transportation costs of a single man who was coming to work in the foundry, women and children were not included and were subject to finding their own way to Beloit.⁶³ The motive of Fairbanks-Morse when they undertook their recruitment efforts was to find men to work for the company to fill the labor shortages in the foundry; the establishment of a Black community in Beloit was an unavoidable result of their initial objective.

Regardless of Fairbanks-Morse's initial motives as a company, the establishment of a Black community within the city of Beloit and Black families moving to the city was unavoidable. Fairbanks-Morse wanted "good churchmen" brought from Mississippi that were willing to work.⁶⁴ It would have been impossible for Fairbanks-Morse to only obtain single male Black laborers from the south. For example, Velma Bell Hamilton who first documented McCord's recruiting journey in "The Negro in Beloit and Madison" written in 1933 was a child when her family migrated from Pontotoc to Beloit in the early part of the twentieth century.⁶⁵ The fact that Bell was a migrant as a child with her family further supports the thought that the recruiters were not solely seeking single men and that the establishment of a Black community in Beloit was unavoidable.

The study of the Beloit Bicentennial Oral History Project from 1976 is proof that many of the men recruited early on had families when they came to Beloit. According to Charles

⁶³ Bell Hamilton, "Negro in Beloit and Madison ", 28-9.

⁶⁴ Interview of Ingram by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

⁶⁵ Pauline E. Olson Basurto "Velma Fern Bell Hamilton: Education and Integration; Though, Word, and Deed" (Bachelor Thesis, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, 2007) 4.

Simmons, McCord and Ingram recruited family members, relatives, and other men they knew to come to Beloit and work at Fairbanks-Morse; likewise, these men that came from the south would ultimately bring the rest of their families with them.⁶⁶ Sadie Bell was a child when her family migrated to Beloit from Mississippi and recalled her father worked in Beloit at Fairbanks-Morse for a period of time before the rest of the family made Beloit their home: “He worked [in Beloit] a few years and he would come home [Mississippi] to see us occasionally and we finally moved here.”⁶⁷ It was common practice with migrants to Beloit to have the man move up first and the rest of the family follow at a later time. Rubie Bond moved to Beloit as a child in 1917 and her entire family moved at the same time, but she recalled her father telling her of a Mr. Grady who had moved to Beloit to work and save money to send back to the rest of his family to move at a later time.⁶⁸

The childhood of Rubie Bond and her family’s migration to Beloit in 1917 shows the importance of the family in the Great Migration to Beloit. Bond was ten years old when she moved to Beloit from Pontotoc with her family because her father was recruited to work at Fairbanks-Morse.⁶⁹ Bond’s father was recruited by McCord and Bond explained what McCord told them of Beloit:

Well, the north offered better opportunities for Blacks. John McCord, who was a distant cousin, came and explained about conditions, here and so my father and mother decided to come. Only of [he told] working conditions and the education for children, for young people, was better than what we had in Pontotoc. Those things I remember. His [McCord] parents lived right across the road. We had a highway that divided the farm that we lived on and where they lived. Of course, we’ve known him and, as I say, his father was a cousin of my mother’s.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Interview of Simmons by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

⁶⁷ Interview of Sadie Bell by Clem Imhoff. Beloit Bicentennial Oral History Project Interviews, 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.

⁶⁸ Interview of Bond by Imhoff. BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin. Transcript accessed online via: <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/teachers/lessons/secondary/rubiebond.asp> (accessed 10 February 2010).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

The case of the Bond family is unique because McCord's father was a distant cousin of Bond's mother, and they lived across the road from McCord's parents in Pontotoc. This shows how important it was for McCord to recruit people he knew and likely believed would benefit from migrating to Beloit. The recruitment efforts were bigger than the men themselves, as Ingram recalled they were recruiting men who were anxious to migrate and seize the opportunity to make a better living.⁷¹

In some situations the pull of family members exceeded the pull of employment opportunities such is the case with Ben Gordon. Gordon stated, "My father went to Beloit on what Uncle Grant told him, but in 1921 nothing was happening; Fairbanks-Morse was shutdown. We were on a welfare program...Fairbanks-Morse was building the foundry."⁷² In 1921 at a cost of \$2.5 million, Fairbanks-Morse constructed a modern state of the art foundry spanning more than six acres in Beloit.⁷³ Gordon's father did not remain unemployed. His first job was working on the foundry project tarring the roof and he soon obtained a job in the Fairbanks-Morse powerhouse for the rest of his days, including the Great Depression; Ben further explains the work of his father: "Fairbanks-Morse created their own power, coal burning furnace and generators that ran continuously; my father was a furnace tender...it was a plum job."⁷⁴

In addition to recruiting men from churches and through personal connections, Fairbanks-Morse recruiters discovered another labor source in the south. The Tuskegee Institute of Alabama served as a source of labor for Fairbanks-Morse. Initially men would come to Beloit from Tuskegee during the summer when school was not in session as a way to earn money for the upcoming semester. Neal Harris was one of these men. Harris first came to Beloit in May

⁷¹ Interview of Ingram by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

⁷² Interview of Ben Gordon by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

⁷³ *Pioneers in Industry: Story of Fairbanks, Morse & Co. 1830 – 1945*, 84.

⁷⁴ Interview of Ben Gordon by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

1923 with thirty-six other men from the Tuskegee Institute to work at Fairbanks-Morse for the summer and earn money for the upcoming school year and he recalls it was his intent to return to school.⁷⁵ The pull of Beloit and Fairbanks-Morse was powerful in the case of Harris though. Ultimately, he decided not to go back to school and choose to continue working at Fairbanks-Morse because he was making good money, met a woman who he later married, and Beloit was less fearful then the South.⁷⁶ As Harris said he “liked city life [Beloit], has not been back to country” and leaving the South resulted in “putting down roots in Beloit.”⁷⁷ Harris was not the only man from Tuskegee who came to Beloit on behalf Fairbanks-Morse, as it turns out Tuskegee provided the company with an important leader in their recruitment efforts.



Figure 5. Neal Harris and Anne Gordon Harris, circa 1925.

Source: Koch, Lewis. “Up North: A Photographic Self-Portrait of the Founding of Beloit’s African-American Community”: photo of Neal Harris and Anne Gordon Harris <http://www.beloitlibrary.info/?pid=126> (accessed 8 February 2010).

⁷⁵ Interview of Neal Harris by Clem Imhoff. Beloit Bicentennial Oral History Project Interviews, 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

The Restricted Leader

Before Fairbanks-Morse was offering summer jobs to men from the Tuskegee Institute they had to build a connection to Tuskegee. The connection to Tuskegee came through J.D. Stevenson, a graduate of Tuskegee who was brought to Beloit to serve as the superintendant of the Edgewater Flats (known today as Fairbanks Flats⁷⁸) and the Edgewater YMCA.⁷⁹ Fairbanks-Morse discovered Stevenson while he had a staff job at Tuskegee; Stevenson would solicit businesses in Beloit and Milwaukee for donations to Tuskegee.⁸⁰ The role of Stevenson in regard to Tuskegee students was to obtain work for them in Beloit at Fairbanks-Morse to earn money during the summer break, ensure they had living arrangements, and make sure the students return to Tuskegee for classes after the summer; this at the time was seen as Black advancement.⁸¹

Essentially Stevenson was the first leader of Beloit's Black community. As Harris recalled, "J.D. Stevenson helped with adjustment to Beloit."⁸² The Reverend D.W. Johnson's recollection of Stevenson was that "he was responsible for providing recreation to keep men off the streets."⁸³ The move by Fairbanks-Morse to find a man to serve as the leader of the Black laborers it brought to Beloit was to protect their reputation as a business. Fairbanks-Morse was already receiving negative sentiment from the city of Beloit due to their acquisition of the land that the Edgewater Flats were built on; the city claimed the land was set aside for a park and

⁷⁸ Wisconsin Historical Society: Wisconsin National Register of Historic Places "Fairbanks Flats" <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/hp/register/viewSummary.asp?refnum=83003416> (accessed 10 February 2010).

⁷⁹ Interview of Rev. Johnson by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

⁸⁰ Interview of Ben Gordon by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

⁸¹ Interview of Neal Harris by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Interview of Rev. Johnson by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

attempted to block Fairbanks-Morse's acquisition of the property.⁸⁴ Fairbanks-Morse was proactive in their efforts to provide the developing Black community of the city a leader to oversee the migrants. Ben Gordon's view towards Stevenson was that he was a "real smart fella" and "we were fortunate in having a person of his caliber to make this adjustment under...knew how to talk to anybody no matter who they were...anything you needed he would find a way for you to get it some way or another...worked with whites."⁸⁵



Figure 6. J.D. Stevenson, Tuskegee Graduate and Executive Secretary of the Edgewater YMCA in his office. *Source:* Koch, Lewis. "Up North: A Photographic Self-Portrait of the Founding of Beloit's African-American Community": photo of J.D. Stevenson <http://www.beloitlibrary.info/?pid=126> (accessed 8 February 2010).

Stevenson was a strong influential leader in the lives of the Black migrants. He developed a wide variety of activities as the superintendent of the Edgewater Flats and YMCA.

⁸⁴ "Condemnation of Edgewater Site is Resolution Text", *Beloit Daily News*, August 21, 1917.

⁸⁵ Interview of Ben Gordon by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

Anne Harris recalls that children loved Stevenson who taught Sunday school every Sunday morning and led the Easter and Christmas programs.⁸⁶ Stevenson's Sunday school lessons were not limited to the children though as religion would take hold in the Black community. Rubie Bond recalls the church playing a very important role in the lives Blacks since it served as a religious center and social center where people discussed problems and relaxed.⁸⁷ Black migrants did not hesitate to bring a wide range of religious diversity to Beloit which is evident in Table 1.

Black Churches in Beloit as of 1933
Allen African Methodist Episcopal
Emanuel Baptist Church
Second Methodist Church
Israel of God's Church
Mt. Zion Baptist
Holiness Church

Table 1. Black Churches in Beloit as of 1933

Source: Velma Hamilton Bell, "The Negro in Beloit and Madison" (M.A. Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1933)

Ambrose Gordon recalled Stevenson would encourage Blacks to read more and know the situations as this could be the path to progress.⁸⁸ Unfortunately Stevenson worked for Fairbanks-Morse who placed restrictions on what he could do. Neal Harris recalled Stevenson could only "get you as far as he was allowed to get you due to his job affiliation with Fairbanks-

⁸⁶ Interview of Anne Harris by Imhoff. BBOHP, 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.

⁸⁷ Interview of Bond by Imhoff. BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin. Transcript accessed online via: <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/teachers/lessons/secondary/rubiebond.asp> (accessed 10 February 2010).

⁸⁸ Interview of Ambrose Gordon by Clem Imhoff. Beloit Bicentennial Oral History Project Interviews, 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society. Madison, Wisconsin.

Morse.”⁸⁹ Overall this was discouraging for the Black community. Stevenson pushed for Blacks to attend vocational school and learn trades to be eligible for advancement, but as Harris remembers “Fairbanks-Morse wouldn’t let you work them machine shop and electrical work jobs...no use in learning trade.”⁹⁰ The overall influence Stevenson could have had on the Black community can only be speculated as his talents were diminished due to his employment with Fairbanks-Morse. Of the individuals interviewed for the Beloit Bicentennial Oral History Project who associated with Stevenson, a great understanding can be gained of him as a person and a leader. It is clear throughout the interviews he was restricted in what he could do, yet in the eyes of those who he worked with an understanding is present that he would do anything within his power for the early Black community of Beloit.



Figure 7. Bible Study Class, Edgewater YMCA; circa 1920.

⁸⁹ Interview of Neal Harris by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Source: Koch, Lewis. “Up North: A Photographic Self-Portrait of the Founding of Beloit’s African-American Community”: photo of Bible Study Class <http://www.beloitlibrary.info/?pid=126> (accessed 8 February 2010).

Ceilinged Community

“The two companies (Fairbanks-Morse and Beloit Iron Works) that hired Blacks had big Foundry operations, only opportunity up until the 1960s.” -Ben Gordon⁹¹

The early development of Beloit’s Black community was encouraging and promising. Blacks were migrating to Beloit with the hope of obtaining steady employment and opportunities for their children to receive a quality education. Fairbanks-Morse, the industrial force responsible for bringing large amounts of Blacks to Beloit looked committed to this venture of opportunity by bringing a leader from Tuskegee to ensure the migrants a smooth transition to Beloit.

School segregation did not exist in Beloit. The children of the Black laborers were free to attend the public schools of Beloit and early on the experience was positive. Anne Harris recalls starting school as soon the family arrived in Beloit and that she enjoyed school integration and the great teachers she had.⁹² Anne Harris is the sister of Ben Gordon. Education within the Gordon family was very important, Anne and Ben’s Uncle Grant was a teacher in Mississippi. Ben Gordon and his twin brother Kennie both excelled in high school and Ben had a scholarship offer to Fisk University, but decided to stay in Beloit because his mother died in 1929.⁹³ Ben Gordon is a unique example of a studious young Black man from Beloit who chose not to leave the city.

Opportunity in Beloit was limited for Blacks. Unfortunately these limitations began in the public schools. Ben Gordon recalls enjoying high school. On the contrary Ben’s twin

⁹¹ Interview of Ben Gordon by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

⁹² Interview of Anne Harris by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

⁹³ Interview of Ben Gordon by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

brother Kennie graduated early and Ben recalls being excused from classes; looking back Ben felt this was an attempt to prevent both him and his brother from finishing at the top of the class because they were Black.⁹⁴ This was not the first time this happened either. Ben reflected that when Velma Bell [Hamilton] graduated from Beloit High School in 1924 there was not a valedictorian when justifiably it should have been Bell, further strengthening his claim to education discrimination.⁹⁵

The early education of Blacks in Beloit can be examined from two perspectives. First and foremost it is inspiring to learn of the children of Black migrants whom had the opportunity to earn a post-secondary education. Velma Bell Hamilton serves as the best example of an individual who migrated to Beloit as a child, pursued an education, and went on to have a profound impact in the community she lived in. The other perspective is rooted in the educated Blacks who left Beloit upon obtaining an education. Unlike his brother Ben, Kennie Gordon decided to leave Beloit following high school for Indianapolis where he became a businessman running his own dry cleaning business.⁹⁶ Although Kennie did not pursue higher education, he represents someone who discovered a skilled trade and became successful. The limited employment opportunities came to represent the ceilinged community.

Employment opportunities in pre-civil rights Beloit were limited, primarily to the foundries of Fairbanks-Morse and Beloit Iron Works (subsequently known as Beloit Corporation⁹⁷). According to Ben Gordon there was a “gentleman’s agreement amongst industry” to only hire Blacks to work foundry jobs.⁹⁸ The limitation to the foundry resulted in

⁹⁴ Ibid.

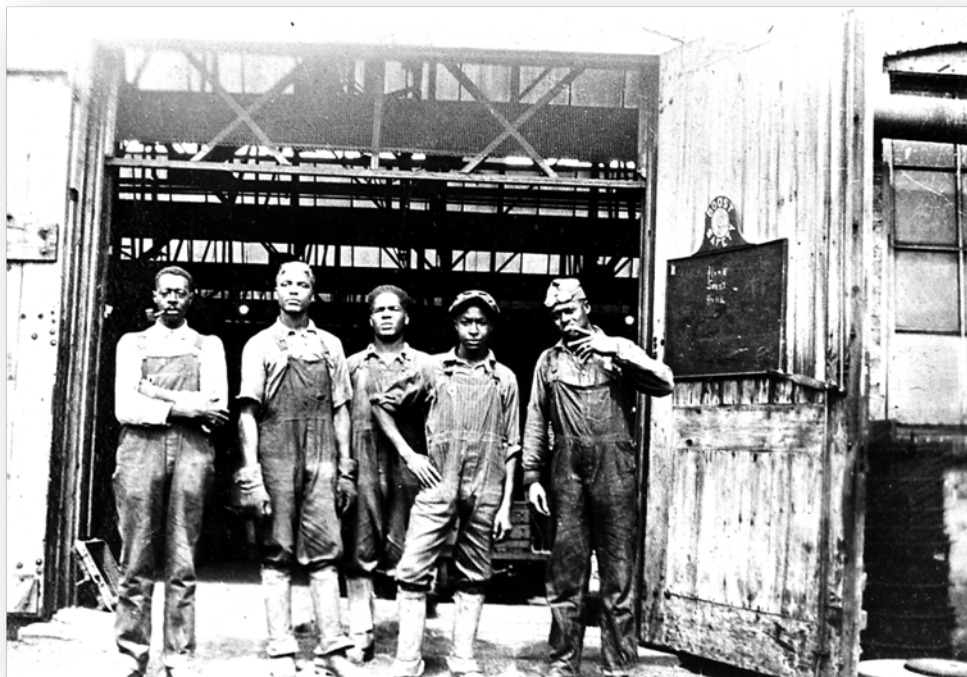
⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Margaret Knorpp Neese, “From Beloit Iron Works to Beloit Corporation” in *Sparks From the Flaming Wheel*, ed. Joseph W. Rhodes (Beloit, WI: Beloit Historical Society, 1984), accessed at <http://www.beloithistoricalsociety.com/ironworks.html> (accessed 9 May 2010).

⁹⁸ Interview of Ben Gordon by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

many Blacks simply choosing to leave Beloit and seek employment elsewhere. The Blacks choosing to leave Beloit for advancement were a combination of educated individuals and skilled laborers who sought advancement in the manufacturing sector. Ben Gordon offers further insight into the Black working class of Beloit during this time period: “Blacks worked in the foundry, believe me that was a dirty place.”⁹⁹ To seek advancement within the manufacturing sector Blacks had a variety of options. Neal Harris recalled that many Blacks who had migrated to Beloit left to seek advancement in the manufacturing sectors of Chicago and Detroit.¹⁰⁰ Written on the chalkboard in Figure 8 below is “home sweet home,” a message of deep meaning for the five men in the photograph and for the Black community as a whole during this time-period. It is unknown who wrote the message but it represents what the Black community became to symbolize in Beloit, the Fairbanks-Morse foundry.



⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Interview of Neal Harris by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

Figure 8. Foundry workers at Fairbanks-Morse; circa 1925.

Source: Koch, Lewis. "Up North: A Photographic Self-Portrait of the Founding of Beloit's African-American Community": photo of Foundry Workers <http://www.beloitlibrary.info/?pid=126> (accessed 8 February 2010).

Pre-civil rights Beloit was not a hospitable city. Omari's 1955 study explains that certain jobs in Beloit had become known as "Negro Jobs."¹⁰¹ This atmosphere provides an understanding of why individuals sought opportunity outside of Beloit. In the case of Clarence L. Johnson and his wife Cleopatra they were tailors by trade who migrated to Beloit for the employment opportunity at Fairbanks-Morse and subsequently moved on to Milwaukee in 1920 where they opened a tailoring business.¹⁰² Likewise, children of migrants were beginning to reach adulthood, graduate from high school, and seek higher education and opportunity elsewhere. Ben Gordon explains the situation of Blacks leaving Beloit for opportunity elsewhere:

Break out of it by leaving Beloit, Blacks coming out of school immediately left. Good people, good education would leave Beloit, go to Chicago, Milwaukee, or Detroit...Black professionals would just leave...always told to wait until 1960s when Martin Luther King Jr. came around.¹⁰³

The Black community was not the only sector of Beloit's population noticing the trend of educated Blacks leaving the city. Omari's study explains that most Blacks and some civic-minded White's of Beloit were in agreement that action should be taken to retain educated Blacks in Beloit.¹⁰⁴ The task was not easy as seen in the case of one professional. Charles Simmons explained how the white community was upset that a "local boy" who attended Beloit College and then Meharry Medical College of Nashville decided to set up his practice in Milwaukee; the White community was upset because they thought by helping him he would

¹⁰¹ Thompson Peter Kwame Omari, "Urban Adjustment of Rural Southern Negro Migrants in Beloit, Wisconsin." (PhD Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1955), 57.

¹⁰² Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 92.

¹⁰³ Interview of Ben Gordon by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

¹⁰⁴ Omari, "Urban Adjustment of Rural Southern Negro Migrants in Beloit, Wisconsin", 57.

return to Beloit.¹⁰⁵ Returning to Beloit for a Black professional would have been a difficult task as it was an uncharted territory for the Black community as a whole. Whoever undertook the venture would have been the pioneer of an educated, professional Black community member in the city of Beloit at this time. Simmons offered a simple response to why educated Blacks did not return to Beloit: “second and third generations of Black kids get educated, go off to college and just don’t come back to Beloit, that’s life.”¹⁰⁶

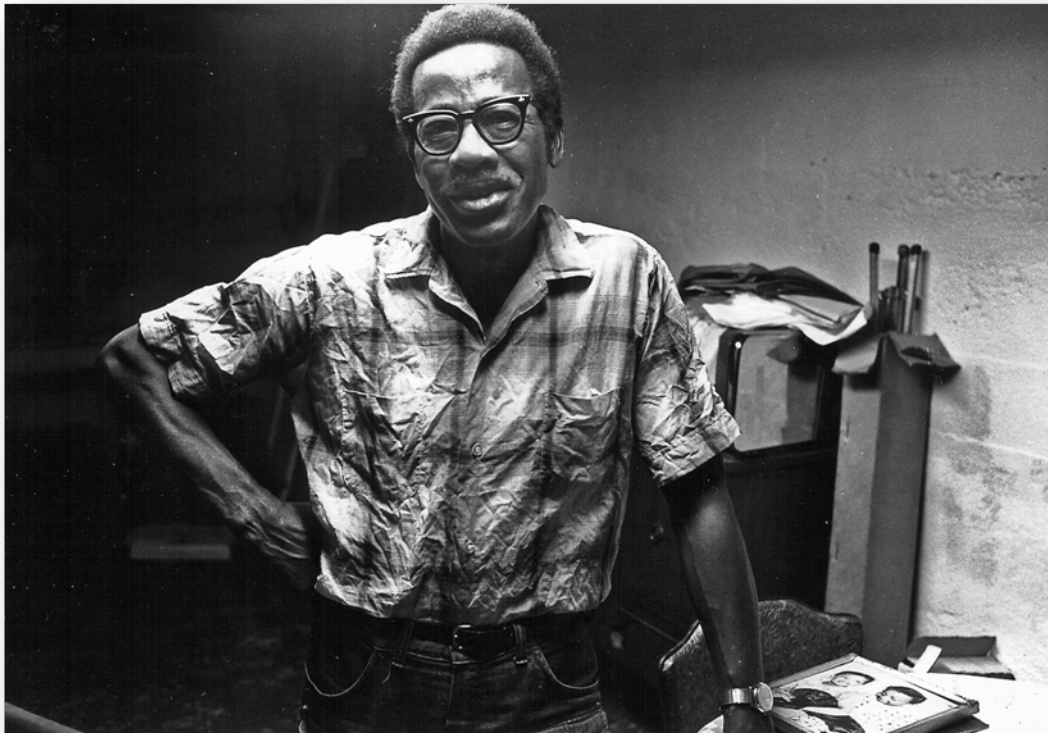


Figure 9. Ben Gordon

Source: Koch, Lewis. “Up North: A Photographic Self-Portrait of the Founding of Beloit’s African-American Community”: photo of Ben Gordon <http://www.beloitlibrary.info/?pid=126> (accessed 8 February 2010).

¹⁰⁵ Interview of Simmons by Imhoff, BBOHP 1976. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

North Mississippi

“Albany and Pontotoc, small towns in Mississippi, are said to have dumped their entire population in Beloit.”¹⁰⁷

Regardless of the lack of opportunity for educated Black professionals in Beloit, the city still attracted southern Black migrants. As Fairbanks-Morse moved forward in the early 1920s through the Second World War and into the 1950s, their strategy to attract labor changed. Rather than send recruiters to the south, Fairbanks-Morse would rely on employees to “sponsor” someone they knew for employment at the factory, oftentimes someone who had recently migrated to Beloit on recommendation of a friend or relative living in Beloit who told them of opportunity in Beloit.¹⁰⁸ Since the first Black migrants to Beloit came from Mississippi this can explain why 72% of the Black migrants living in Beloit at the time of Omari’s study on Beloit in 1955 were from the state of Mississippi, specifically “one fourth from Pontotoc, one sixth from Houston, and the rest from New Albany, West Point, and Ripley.”¹⁰⁹ Omari’s Sociological study provides valuable statistical data in regards to Black migrants to Beloit. Furthermore the reason many of the Blacks choose to leave the south according to Omari’s study was for employment opportunities (63%), live with relatives (16%), and escaping segregation, discrimination, social conditions and just being sick of living in the south accounts for 18% of the respondents who choose to move to Beloit.¹¹⁰ Omari’s statistical explanation of why southern Blacks migrated to Beloit displays that industry, individuals, and family played a role in the decision to migrate.

¹⁰⁷ Scott, *Negro Migration During The War*, 111

¹⁰⁸ Omari, “Urban Adjustment of Rural Southern Negro Migrants in Beloit”, 50-1

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 52

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 53: Omari provides the statistical breakdown of why southerners left the south specifically for Beloit.

Figure 10 below outlines the Pontotoc, Houston, New Albany, West Point, and Ripley area of northeastern Mississippi.

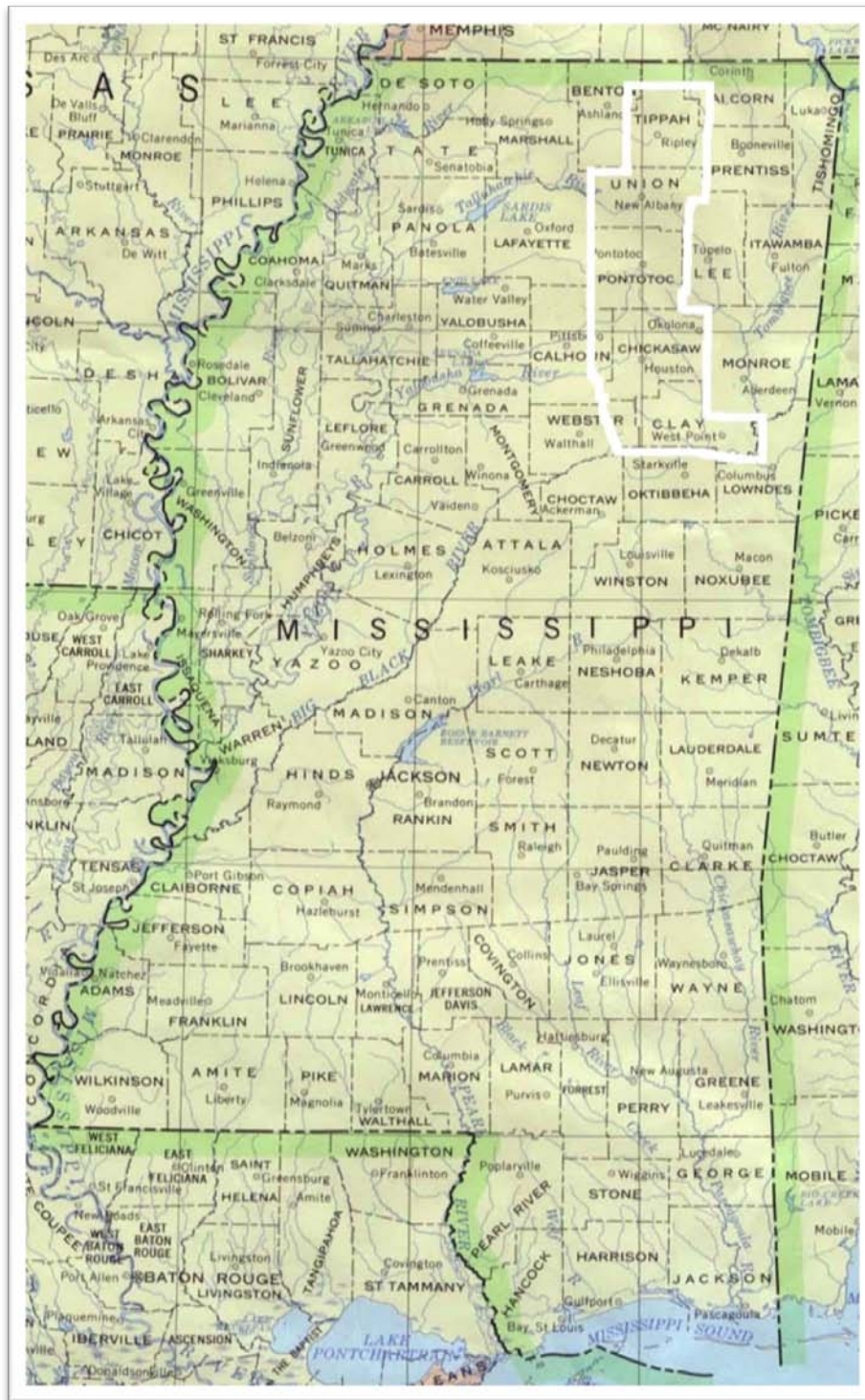


Figure 10. Map of Mississippi with Pontotoc, Houston, New Albany, West Point, and Ripley outlined
Source: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/united_states/mississippi_90.jpg (accessed 14 April 2010).

The Mississippi connection occurred because John McCord, the first known Black migrant to Beloit within the context of the Great Migration, subsequently became a labor recruiter for Fairbanks-Morse and utilized his home town as his recruiting base. Overall his role and subsequently the role of Walter Ingram provide the explanation as to why a vast majority of Beloit's Black migrants came from northeastern Mississippi.

Initially it was difficult to grasp how large the Black community of Beloit truly was. Scholars such as Emmett Scott observed this phenomenon:

In Beloit, Wisconsin, as in other cities, it was impossible to find out with any degree of accuracy the approximate number of Negroes [Blacks]. Estimates of the number ranged from 700 to 2,000, whereas, before the influx, the Black population was as low as 200. The total population of Beloit is about 20,000.¹¹¹

The initial migration period was during the First World War. This is when Fairbanks-Morse actively recruited in the south for laborers. Following the First World War, Fairbanks-Morse would welcome students from Tuskegee for a brief period of time before altering their policy to just rely on individual employees to notify people of the employment opportunities present at the factory. The policy of employee sponsoring for employment is a contributing factor to the large amounts of migrants from northeastern Mississippi. As the Omari study proved, the majority of Blacks in Beloit were originally from Mississippi, thus they would inform friends and relatives in Mississippi of opportunities in Beloit. Examining migration to Beloit between the years of 1914 to 1955 provides an understanding of the initial migration spurred by recruitment and provides the basis for the subsequent migration of individuals and families on recommendation.

¹¹¹ Scott, *Negro Migration During the War*, 110.

CONCLUSION

Fairbanks-Morse went south to solve their labor shortages, and in doing so, they established the nucleus for Beloit's Black community. Larger urban cities, such as Chicago saw the building of their Black communities through the response to various factors, such as the widely circulated *Chicago Defender* in the South advertising superior conditions in the North along with the Illinois Central Railroad carrying people north from New Orleans to Chicago.¹¹² Beloit as a migration destination was pioneered by Fairbanks-Morse and the men they sent south to recruit. As Scott explains, "As is true in most small cities, one company took the initiative in sending for men from the south. The Fairbanks, Morse and Company was the pioneer corporation in this respect in Beloit. This company hires at present 200 men."¹¹³ The industrial demands of Fairbanks-Morse, persistent efforts by some brave individuals, and the institution of family provided an opportunity for southern Blacks seeking to migrate north to Beloit. The end result was the establishment of a Black community.

Regardless of those that made the decision to leave Beloit, the city managed to retain and continue to attract migrants which established a Black community which still exists today. Although there were a limited number of Blacks in the city before the migration that began with McCord's first recruiting trip to Mississippi in 1916, it can be recognized that Fairbanks-Morse's recruitment efforts established and founded a larger Black community for the city of Beloit. As of the 2000 Census, Beloit's population is 15.4% Black out of an overall population of 35,775; in

¹¹² Grossman, *Land of Hope*, Chapters 3 and 4 explain this phenomena

¹¹³ Scott, *Negro Migration During The War*, 111

contrast Wisconsin's Black population is merely 5.7% of the total population.¹¹⁴ Below Table 2 displays how Beloit compares to other Wisconsin cities percentage wise in regards to Black population as of the 2000 Census.

Table 2: Black Population Percentages of Select Wisconsin Cities

City	% of Black Population	Total Population
Milwaukee	37.3%	596,974
Racine	20.3%	81,855
Beloit	15.4%	35,775
Kenosha	7.7%	90,352
Madison	5.8%	208,054
Janesville	1.3%	59,498
Eau Claire	0.7%	61,704

Table 2. Percentage Breakdown of Black Population in select Wisconsin Cities.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/55/5506500.html> (accessed 27 March 2010).

As of 2000 Beloit has the third largest percentage of Black population in the state of Wisconsin. Considering Beloit has the smallest population of the cities listed above shows the powerful influence Fairbanks-Morse had on establishing Beloit's Black community through recruiting Black laborers from the south. Without Fairbanks-Morse recruiting Black labor from the south, Beloit's Black population would probably be very similar to Janesville, a city less than fifteen miles north of Beloit. The roles of industry, individuals, and family established Beloit's Black community.

¹¹⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/55/5506500.html> (accessed 27 March 2010)

FUTURE WORK

Interest in the founding of Beloit's Black community has always been in the back of my mind and with the completion of this project has come to the forefront. Recently it seems the establishment of Beloit's Black community and Fairbanks-Morse's role has been a topic of interest amongst History students in the University of Wisconsin System as Zachary Sell, now a graduate of UW-Milwaukee and a graduate student at the University of Illinois completed his senior honor's thesis on the building of Beloit's Black community and is referenced in my work. I e-mailed Zachary in the process of my research and he is re-writing his work with the hope of getting it published. My work aims to explain the roles played by industry, individuals, and family in the founding of Beloit's Black community and can contribute to the overall knowledge of the topic. Personally it is great to see others who have chosen to embark on the topic. Future work within this topic is plenty, whether I undertake it remains to be seen. It would be interesting to interview willing members of Beloit's Black community to see how many people today can trace their family history back to the south, specifically northeastern Mississippi. Another interesting aspect would be to study whether this migration to Beloit is still taking place.

This thesis aims to explain the Great Migration to Beloit as a result of actions taken by industry, individuals, and family. There is still plenty of work to be done regarding the Great Migration and its connection to Beloit. An examination of the primary source, the Beloit Bicentennial Oral History Project of 1976 provides great details into a variety of topics surrounding migration to Beloit and subsequently settlement. Aspects that could be studied are the roles played by the NAACP, religion, education, industries such as Fairbanks-Morse and the Beloit Corporation, and individual community members during the first half of twentieth century

Beloit. Personally, the most interesting aspect of the development of Beloit's Black community that I would be most likely to undertake would be the unionization of laborers at Fairbanks-Morse and the Beloit Corporation. Furthermore, it would be interesting to complete a second round of oral interview recordings for future generations to have access to. The interviews would focus on Black migration to Beloit during the 1950s and would aim to interview those who migrated to Beloit during that decade. A friend of the family claims the 1950s was when all of the cousins moved north and his father was one of them.

Another significant bit of information in regards to the topic is the recent announcement in the *Beloit Daily News* that a documentary is being produced about Beloit's African-American history.¹¹⁵ The documentary is being produced by Jim Caldwell who is the head coach of the NFL's Indianapolis Colts and his wife Cheryl, both natives of Beloit. Hopefully this project will help increase the awareness and build recognition for the historical founding of Beloit's Black community and its overall connection to the Great Migration. Personally, I feel the city of Beloit does not recognize much of its history of the twentieth century beyond its manufacturing history and hopefully something will be done to begin recognizing the social history of the city.

¹¹⁵ Caldwell's Plan Beloit Video, *Beloit Daily News*, March 29, 2010

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