

Beloit, Wisconsin and the Great Migration

The Role of Industry, Individuals, and Family in the Founding of Beloit's Black Community



Lucas W. Knowles
Department of History
University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire
Faculty Mentor: James Oberly



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 Black's 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.

Community Establishment

Fairbanks, Morse and Company would bring Black men to Beloit from the South as a source of labor. The company paid the travel expenses for these men if they produced satisfactory work and stayed with the company for 90 days. Many of these men that McCord and Ingram recruited had families down South that they would send their earnings to. When the family remaining in the South saved up enough financial resources they would make the journey to Beloit. In some cases the whole family would make the journey all at once. Many of the early migrants were related to others making the journey. Rubie Bond who migrated to Beloit as a child was a distant cousin of McCord and their families lived across the road from each other in Pontotoc, Mississippi. (Bond, 1976)

Mississippi North?

Many of the migrants to Beloit came from Northeastern Mississippi.

- A 1955 study showed that 72% of the Black migrants to Beloit came from Mississippi.
- "One fourth from Pontotoc, one sixth from Houston, and the rest from New Albany, West Point, and Ripley" (Omari 52, 1955).
- 63% came for Employment opportunities.
- 16% came to live with relatives
- 18% said they came to Beloit to escape segregation, discrimination, social conditions, or were just sick of living in the South

J.D. Stevenson and Tuskegee

J.D. Stevenson

- Stevenson was brought to Beloit to serve as the superintendent for the Edgewater Flats and YMCA which Fairbanks, Morse and Company developed as housing and recreation for the Black workers and their families.
- Rev. D.W. Johnson recalls that Stevenson "was responsible for providing recreation to keep men off the streets" (Johnson, 1976).
- Migrant Neil Harris recalls that Stevenson "helped with adjustment to Beloit" (Harris, 1976).
- The move to bring a Black leader was likely done due to the negative views the city of Beloit was developing towards Fairbanks, Morse and Company for the land purchase that made where the Flats and YMCA were constructed. ("Condemnation of Edgewater Site is Resolution Text", *Beloit Daily News* 21 August 1917.)

Tuskegee

- In the early 1920s men were recruited from the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama to work in the summer months when school was not in session.
- The students from Tuskegee used this as an opportunity to earn money for the upcoming school year.
- Ultimately some chose to stay in Beloit such as Neil Harris.
- Harris came to Beloit from Tuskegee with 36 other men. (Harris, 1976)

The Great Migration

The First World War

- Changes in Immigration Policy
- Southern Economy
- Agriculture and Boll Weevil
- Industrialization of Agriculture

Social Situation

- Jim Crow



John McCord, circa 1920

Why Beloit?

Fairbanks, Morse and Company

- Labor Shortages due to the First World War, changes in immigration policy, and increased production.

Producer of Gasoline Engines

- Industrialization of agriculture and manufacturing of engines for foreign countries

"Fairbanks-Morse's Beloit works engines were integral to the industrialization of agriculture – a technological phenomenon that contributed to the Great Migration." (Sell 24, 2008)

Company Based Recruitment Efforts

- Failed Recruiting efforts in Chicago, turned to the South

Why Recruiting Chicago Failed:

- "White straggling immigrants who wouldn't stay and wouldn't work." (Simmons 1976)

Recruiting the South

McCord made 4 recruiting trips to the South on behalf of Fairbanks, Morse and Company

- Primarily Northeastern Mississippi
- Pontotoc, Houston, New Albany, West Point, and Ripley (Omari 52, 1955)

After the first trip to the South, Walter Ingram would join McCord as a labor recruiter. Ingram was a Semi-Pro baseball player and knew the ins and outs of Northeastern Mississippi. (Ingram, 1976)

What Fairbanks, Morse and Company wanted:

- "Churchmen from Mississippi, good people, good men, absolutely no gamblers." (Ingram, 1976)

Ingram felt he was doing the "lord's work" by recruiting good men for the opportunity to escape the South for a good paying job in Beloit. (Ingram, 1976).

Recruiting the South was a dangerous venture by McCord and Ingram. Many southern states had laws against 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." Ultimately Ingram and McCord stopped recruiting after witnessing a mob lynching in Memphis, Tennessee. (Ingram, 1976) Ingram is pictured below in 1920 with his wife Daisy.



J.D. Stevenson in his office at the Edgewater YMCA, circa 1920



Edgewater YMCA Billiards Room, circa 1920

Limited Opportunity and Post-War Recruiting

The sad reality for many Black migrants to Beloit was that they had limited room for advancement. The only jobs available to Blacks in Beloit were in Foundries as unskilled laborers. According to Neal Harris many educated Blacks simply choose to leave for Beloit for "open cities" such as Milwaukee or Chicago and it was common for skilled Black laborers to seek advancement in the industrial sector in Detroit and Chicago rather than remain in the Foundries of Beloit (Harris, 1976). Clarence L. Johnson who was a tailor by trade from his education at Tuskegee choose to move to Milwaukee where he opened his own tailoring business with his wife (Trotter 92, 1985). Those who remained in Beloit had to deal with many struggles. The community leaders would pride themselves that their city was not segregated because Blacks resided in every section of the city, yet within those sections the Blacks were clustered together into "islands" where a low number of whites's resided (Omari 56, 1955). The school system was not segregated, yet Black students experienced discrimination from other students and teachers as they tried to achieve their education (Bell, 1976). This led to a lot of educated Blacks choosing to leave Beloit upon entering adulthood. This did not stop Blacks from migrating to Beloit from the South though. Following the First World War, Fairbanks, Morse & Co. did not directly recruit laborers from the South but relied on their employees to sponsor a friend or family member for employment within the company during boom years (Omari 51, 1955).



Future Work

Jim Caldwell, head coach of the NFL's Indianapolis Colts and Beloit native is producing a documentary about Beloit's Black community with his wife Cheryl who is also a native of Beloit.

My recurring thought about the Great Migration to Beloit poses the question of whether this migration is still occurring?

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Overall Significance

The roles played by Industry, Individuals, and Family during the Great Migration are the reasons Beloit has a Black community. As of the 2000 Census, 15.4% of Beloit's population is Black. As a state, Wisconsin's Black population is 5.7% of the total population. The Overall population of Beloit was 35,775 as of 2000. Percentage wise Beloit has the 3rd largest Black community in Wisconsin behind Milwaukee and Racine. If Fairbanks, Morse and Company did not recruit Black laborers from the South, Beloit would probably have a Black community comparable to Janesville which is the next closest city to Beloit and has a very small Black population. Janesville which is an industrial city like Beloit did not have any companies recruit southern Blacks during the time of the Great Migration.



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

Works Cited