

WHY BLACKS HAVE MIGRATED TO CHAMPAIGN, ILLINOIS  
1950-1960

In today's society many northerners think of blacks as a very urban race. Blacks constitute a high percentage of the population of major cities across the north. For example, in Chicago, Illinois, 45% of the population is black. Some of the other cities across the north with high black populations are: Detroit, Michigan; Gary, Indiana; Cleveland, Ohio; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and New York, New York. But one also finds small cities that have a substantial number of blacks. In Champaign, Illinois, for example, 13% of its 59,000 residents are black. During the migration of blacks from the south ever since the Civil War, through the 1960s, one must answer the questions why, instead of going to Chicago, Detroit and other major northern industrial cities, did blacks stop and set up homes in Champaign? Secondly, during the late '50s and during the 1960s, when the major cities of the midwest were meccas for black achievement, entertainment and overall social life, Areas such as Chicago and Detroit were leaders in the civil rights movement. Detroit began the Motown sound, and Chicago had great black businesses like Johnson and Johnson Publishing Company. Given all of this, why did blacks from the south still migrate to small midwestern cities such as Champaign, Illinois? When the major cities were socially enriched with black culture why did blacks still remain in these smaller places?

In this analysis of black migration to Champaign, Illinois I will answer the questions stated before in the introduction. I have interviewed three residents of Champaign's predominantly black north end. These people I interviewed were not born in Champaign, but they all came here and stayed for both the same and different reasons. They all arrived in the Champaign area during the 1950s and 1960s. It is during this era that I will be concentrating on.

During the prewar period of the 1950s another wave of blacks were migrating to the north in search of jobs. The nation's economy was great, and jobs were given out daily at manufacturing plants in the north. Many blacks in the south heard about this prosperity from their northern relatives, and it was on this note that many migrated north.

Joe Taylor was only 12 years old when he came to Champaign and settled on the north end. Mr. Taylor was born in a small rural environment in Mississippi. It was in 1954 that Joe Taylor's father died, and his mother now became responsible for making money to support her six children. Knowing her predicament, her sister who resided in Champaign wrote and told her she would be able to find work there. She packed up and brought her six children to Champaign, where she began working as a cleaning lady for a well-off white family in Champaign. Coming from a rural Mississippi environment, Joe Taylor was introduced to many different things. It was here in Champaign where he saw his first T.V., he experienced electricity, proper schooling

and less violent racism. All of these were very new to him and he liked it, because it was far better than what he had experienced in rural Mississippi. As Mr. Taylor grew older he became very attached to the north end Champaign community. Because it was here that he had received his education. He heard of places such as Chicago and he visited them, but he never felt the same warmth of a community there like he felt in Champaign. Today Joe Taylor still works and makes his home on the north end of Champaign. He enjoys Champaign and he is a respected man, but now he thinks of retiring in Mississippi, because of its warm climate, his roots and because of the racial improvements the south has made since he has left.

It was during the turbulent '60s that blacks were looking for equality; as a race blacks were fed up with segregation and many other aspects of inequality. Blacks were trying to make society better for their children. It was during this period, in 1968, that John Stanley came to Champaign. He was born in a small town in Kentucky when at 19 years old he came to Champaign to just visit a friend. He was so overcome by the environment in Champaign he stayed. What he experienced here in Champaign he had never experienced before in Kentucky. He found the white people to be genuinely nice. For example, when he and his friend went visiting a white resident of Champaign he was asked if he would like a sandwich. He expected just meat in between bread, but what he received was a grand sandwich with tomatoes, lettuce and mayonnaise. He was very amazed. He also experienced

a great deal of liberalism compared to his home in Kentucky. He explained Champaign as a place where you could wear one purple shoe and one green shoe and nobody would look at you as if you were crazy. He enjoys this liberalism. John Stanley has also visited Chicago and Detroit, but he considers those places too fast for him, and as a resident of Champaign's north end he considers himself very fortunate to have found a community like this.

It was 1952 that Hurley Price came to Champaign as a small boy with his family. Coming from Bolivar, Tennessee they were on their way to Chicago. The train stopped in Champaign when his father just decided to get off for reasons he as a young boy never did understand. It was that same year that Mr. Price's father began working for one of the railroad companies in Champaign. As he explained to me during this period whites didn't want to work outside so most of the heavy labor jobs of this period were given to blacks. As in the case of Joe Taylor and John Stanley, Hurley Price also experienced less racism and received a better education in Champaign than what he had received in Tennessee. He always wanted to live in Chicago, but because of family responsibilities he never had the chance. He still works and resides in Champaign's north end, but similar to Joe Taylor he also dreams of returning to his former home, Tennessee.

Joe Taylor, John Stanley and Hurley Price all were born in the southern region of the United States. Each came to

Champaign, Illinois for different reasons, but they all stayed for basically the same reasons. From interviewing these three Champaign residents one can gather knowledge on why blacks migrated to Champaign instead of going to areas where the population of blacks was larger, such as Chicago and Detroit. One can also assume why blacks remained here while there were better opportunities for blacks in Chicago and Detroit. In the cases of Joe Taylor and John Stanley and in the case of many other black residents of Champaign they came here because of relatives or friends who wrote letters and told them how it was better than the south, and that there were job opportunities for blacks in Champaign. In the case of Hurley Price, his father stopped in Champaign because of the three large railroad lines (Illinois Central Railroad, Big Four, and the Wabash) that were here and provided work and good pay for blacks, because at the time whites didn't want those jobs. As I gathered from these interviews the circumstances for many of the blacks who migrated here were either knowing from relatives or finding jobs. Many blacks stayed in Champaign because of jobs they had. In the case of Joe Taylor and John Stanley, they knew of the large black culturally enriching communities like Chicago and Detroit, but when they visited these places they found them too busy and large. They feel Champaign is not too small and not too large. Hurley Price has stayed in Champaign because of the responsibility he has to his family. Even though he would like to reside in Chicago, his steady job and children have kept him in Champaign.

Today 13% of the residents of Champaign, Illinois are black. This percentage has been increasing ever since the 1930s. We can now assume many black residents have come to Champaign because of the same reasons Joe Taylor, John Stanley and Hurley Price came to Champaign. Many have assumed that northern blacks are very urban, but just like any other race, northern blacks occupy both large urban areas and small towns. As we have seen in Champaign, even though it is not a major northern city, blacks have been attracted here mainly because of jobs and relatives.

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