NEWS via Christian Science Monitor: Why African-Americans are moving back to the South

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After decades of moving north, thousands of blacks are returning to their Southern roots for economic and cultural reasons.

By Carmen K. Sisson, Correspondent / March 16, 2014

Artist Kia Darceo left Milwaukee for Atlanta, which she calls 'Black Mecca.' This is the cover story in the Mar. 17 issue of The Christian Science MonitorWeekly.

Melanie Stetson Freeman/Staff

WEST POINT, MISS.

When Charlie Cox told his friends he was leaving Chicago, no one tried to talk him out of it. After 35 years at General Motors, he was ready to retire. Ready to trade the cold and the crime and the frenetic pace of life for the rivers and fields of his youth. He had grown up in rural West

Point, Miss., and he had moved north with his family when he was 9 years old, but somehow his heart had never quite followed. His spirit yearned for the South, and, as the years passed, the memories of his childhood burned brighter until he couldn't stand it any longer.

There was only one problem: His wife, Darlene, wasn't so enamored of the idea. She had been born and raised in Chicago and had deep roots in the South as well, but her impressions of the region were far from idyllic. Her ancestors were slaves, working the cotton fields of Tunica, Miss., and she didn't have fond memories of her family's trips to Mississippi in the 1960s.

As a result, she and Charlie found themselves at an impasse – he longed to return to a place he had never wanted to leave, but it was a place she had never wanted to live.

Was he sure, she asked?

Yes, he said. I have to do this. Come with me.

She did. Today, as she prepares breakfast in the kitchen of their three-bedroom house in West Point – a town whose entire population would fill only a quarter of the seats at Wrigley Field – she shares his enthusiasm about the move. They recently returned from a trip to Chicago and couldn't wait to get home.

"I wouldn't [trade] anything for West Point now," Ms. Cox says as she slides a thick slice of bacon into a cast-iron skillet.

"It's quiet here," Mr. Cox agrees. "You can relax more down here. I don't worry about my car when I park out here in the yard."

The Coxes' decision is one unfolding in African-American households across the nation. After decades of mass exodus, blacks are returning to the South in one of the most notable migrations of the new century.

It's a subtle but significant shift that experts say provides not only a snapshot of the changing economics and sociology of the nation but of an emerging new South and, in some cases, of a growing disillusionment with the urban North.

For most of the 20th century, blacks were buying one-way tickets out of the Jim Crow South in hopes of a better life. Nearly 6 million African-Americans followed the railroads to places likeDetroit and Chicago, never dreaming that their children and grandchildren would someday lead a return migration, chasing the American dream back down the Mississippi and straight across the Mason-Dixon line.

The Great Migration slowly eased in the 1970s as the North's economic fortunes began to dim and the South's racial climate began to improve. But it wasn't until the 2000 Census, when the South posted its first black population increase in more than a century, that demographers started to really take notice. By 2010, about 57 percent of the nation's African-Americans were

living in the South – a higher percentage than at any time in 50 years.

The South, to be sure, has been a population magnet for people of all races since the end of World War II. The region was the top destination for newcomers between 1997 and 2011, picking up 1.52 million people – the majority from the Midwest – according to the US Census Bureau's 2012 American Community Survey.

Economics is part of the overall draw, notes William Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., but for African-Americans, there's something else to consider: Even at its lowest points, the South was still home to the majority of the nation's black residents, giving it a culturally and sociologically significant role in African-American history and making it, if not always comfortable, at least always familiar.

Some of the return migrants, like the Coxes, are retirees, while others are college-educated young people, driven by economic realities, historical curiosity, and the old-fashioned American drive to explore new frontiers and create new worlds. But there is a universal thread that runs through their narratives – the pull of a cultural homeland.

The South has a way of resonating with people, says John Giggie, associate professor of history and director of graduate studies at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. For African-Americans, many of whom have maintained their Southern ties through family reunions and church homecomings, it is not so much a homeland to which they are returning as it is a heartland they never left.

It doesn't surprise Dr. Giggie to hear of people like Mr. Cox, who doesn't live on the 25-acre homestead his family owns but still pays the property taxes and cuts the grass. On weekends, he can be found there hunting, fishing, or just walking in the fields, enjoying the silence.

"Owning land is a key component of Southern identity," Giggie says. "Southerners with money invested in slaves and land, and those with land were the ones who came away with the greatest political clout. There's always been that promise you bequeath to your loved ones. For those able to procure it, land became a prized possession."

The search for roots, and the urge to explore their African-American heritage, is a key motivator for some of the new migration's youngest participants. Many are the first, second, or third generations to be born in Northern cities.

Most have visited family in the South, but some have not. Many have never stood in a field of blinding white cotton. Few can imagine a Jim Crow world, where courtrooms used separate Bibles for blacks and whites, towns had separate parks, and some businesses wouldn't allow black and white employees to walk through the same doors.

And yet, these young people have grown up with the language, the music, the food, the cultural touch points that sustained their ancestors for so long, says Isabel Wilkerson, author of "The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration," a chronicle of the journey north by blacks between 1915 and 1970. For them, moving back to the South is a way to

connect with their heritage on a deeper level and understand their culture in a new way.

Detroit native Aretha Frison had traveled extensively and even attended college at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee, but she says she felt most at home when she moved to New Orleans in 2006. Her ancestors were slaves in Tuscaloosa, and her last name is a variant of the plantation owner's name, "Frierson." She vividly remembers visiting family in Tuscaloosa and seeing the historical site where slaves were bought and sold.

As an ardent history buff, she was drawn to the South, first by curiosity and later by love. She was thrilled when she received a scholarship to study journalism in Florida, determined to treat the experience as a grand adventure.

But Ms. Frison was homesick. She and other Detroit natives in her program spent a lot of time looking at their high school yearbooks, reminiscing about home. Sometimes, she says, they "trailed" each other from Tallahassee to Detroit, waving as they passed on the Interstate.

Then, in August 2005, hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. Intuitively, she felt impelled to help out. After traveling to Louisiana three times with church mission teams, she moved there permanently in August 2006, taking a job as a teacher in a private school. New Orleans became home.

Now Frison works as a news producer at WDSU-TV, and she credits the city with making her the person she is today. Her exuberance is infectious as she talks of the people she has met who grew up elsewhere but came to visit New Orleans – and stayed.

"It's not just snowbirds," she says. "People are moving down here and trying to make a better quality of life, trying to make a difference."

She likes the climate, the beaches, the parks. She likes the diversity and the cultural mélange. She likes the food and the spirit of the city that was battered but refused to break. But mostly, she loves the people.

"My roots are here in the South, even though they went north for a while," she says.

Of course, the economy has been a major impetus for some migrants' journeys. But it usually takes more than the promise of a bigger paycheck or a better job to lure people across state lines.

"People move not only for economic incentives, but also to pursue dreams and escape nightmares," says Michael Barone, a political analyst at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., and author of "Shaping Our Nation: How Surges of Migration Transformed America and Its Politics." "The South, with its widespread rising prosperity, seems to be less of a nightmare."

When World War II began, black newspapers in the South began to hail the North's virtues as a land of economic opportunity. They depicted it as a place where blacks could escape

segregation and pursue their dreams of a better life. As a result, nearly one-third of the South's black population eventually headed north. In the mid-1960s, as riots rocked Northern cities and legal segregation ended in the South, that migration stream dried up, according to Mr. Barone.

It was that kind of "escape logic" that led Betsy Hurt to leave Flint, Mich., after more than 30 years. Ms. Hurt grew up in Columbus, Miss., but like so many others, she headed for Chicago in 1953 in search of work. After several years of bouncing back and forth between the regions, she got married and made Michigan her home.

Before the Great Recession began in 2007, her neighborhood was a quiet place where longtime residents enjoyed summer evenings in their yards.

Then came the layoffs. The factory closings. The foreclosures. Gangs moved in. Drug sales took place in the middle of the street. Vandals stripped homes of aluminum siding and stole cooling systems from churches.

One by one, her neighbors moved away. Renters took their places. People locked their doors, and no one sat outside anymore.

One day in 2011 she was standing on her front porch, talking to the mailman, when a gunfight broke out in front of her house. A few days later, gang members tried to shoot one of her grandsons.

"That was the final straw," says Hurt. "My children said, 'You're going to leave there,' so I let my house go into foreclosure and closed the door on 30 years of memories."

A lot of her friends had retired and returned to the South. Since she had a daughter in Raleigh, N.C., she decided to make that her new home. By 2012, she was a Southerner again.

Recently, Hurt moved into a senior citizen apartment complex, and she was surprised to find that many of her new neighbors are from the North, too.

She lives on the third floor, and from her window, she looks down on beds of cheerful pansies. She rarely needs her heavy winter coat when she takes her Yorkiepoo, Quasi, for his evening stroll.

"When I first got here, it just looked magical," Hurt says. "I never would have thought I would end up here, but it's just awesome. It's a very, very nice, safe place."

Her decision to move stemmed as much from a desire to flee the North as it did to settle in the South. In that sense, she reflects the sentiments of some of the new migrants. Some critics, in fact, have portrayed the reverse migration as an indictment of the urban North – as a flight from the lack of jobs, the abundance of mean streets, and the growing social woes of Northern cities.

Others believe the movement of blacks to the South, like that of many other Americans, is rooted in the natural and inevitable rhythms of a mobile society – the enduring growth of the Sun

Belt, the simple yearning for warmer weather among retirees, and the desire to start fresh in a region where the cost of living is often cheaper.

Either way, the black migration comes at the expense of Northern cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and New York. A 2009 study by sociologists at Queens College in New York, for instance, found that approximately 17 percent of the South's new migrants over a 10-year period came from New York State.

Lorrinn Woods simply wanted a nice, safe place to live. Although she was born and raised in Philadelphia – and loved it there – she felt the city was becoming too dangerous. So she moved to Georgia, which she felt was "someplace better." She went to work for a local nonprofit and found a nice apartment in midtown. But by 2009, Atlanta was beginning to feel the pangs of the economic downturn, and she lost her job. Her family's roots were in Prichard, Ala., so she moved there briefly, then settled a few miles away in Mobile. She went back to college for a degree in accounting and is now working as a business consultant at a minority business development agency.

"Alabama is one of those states that have bad reputations, but those times have passed," Ms. Woods says. "It's not 1854 anymore. Alabama is a new frontier and a wonderful place for opportunities."

The Coxes discovered new opportunities in Mississippi, too. It just took them a while. Initially, they had a tough time adjusting to the slower lifestyle, particularly Darlene.

She missed the food in Chicago and the way anything she wanted was available a short distance away, at any hour. During the first few months of the couple's return, she caught a Greyhound back to the Windy City every chance she got until, finally, she "snapped out of it." She let herself embrace her new home.

She became a substitute teacher for the West Point School District. Last May, she ran for city mayor, opposing a longtime area politician. She lost by a substantial margin but still feels she left a mark.

The couple's engagement in their community raises a fundamental question about the reverse migration: What effect will it end up having on the South – and the nation?

The Great Migration transformed the nation politically, economically, and culturally. But most experts don't see the current cavalcade in the opposite direction having anything like that level of impact.

For one thing, far fewer blacks are moving this time. They are also moving back to a region that is far more racially diverse than when they moved up north. Many of the African-Americans returning to the South are settling in urban and rural areas across the region. During the Great Migration, blacks concentrated largely in a handful of Northern cities, where they helped reshape neighborhoods, race relations, and politics.

Still, any migration of significance will have at least some implications. One could be to boost theDemocratic Party, as large numbers of middle-class African-Americans return to predominantly Republican states. Yet their influx could bring new tensions to the party as well: According to the University of Alabama's Giggie, many of the migrants come with a "Northern-inflected liberalism" that may nudge Democrats across the region, traditionally fairly conservative, leftward.

Some of the biggest adjustments may have to come from the new arrivals themselves. Author Ms. Wilkerson and others say that, even though the discriminatory laws of the South have long since vanished, there is a caste system in place that makes it difficult for outsiders to rise in the power structure politically or socially.

Darlene Cox quickly came to that conclusion after her brief foray into politics. "You can't climb the ladder here unless somebody knows you," she says.

Still, the newcomers are infusing the region with new energy and ideas. Demographer Mr. Frey notes that, while a weak national economy is slowing migration in the United States in general, the flow of people to the South will continue. Among the African-Americans, he says, will be a large number of young, middle-class, college-educated professionals ready to move into neighborhoods that are becoming more integrated. They will be drawn by an idealism about the future as well as the ever-present pull of the past.

"[The South] is home," says Charles Steele, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta. "Even though it's a dark side of your history, you can never forget about it. You always want to make it better."

You won't get any argument from the Coxes. Both Charlie and Darlene volunteer at church and community events. Every year, they organize a free, community-wide Thanksgiving meal. They are rooted in their new home in the South, as are many of their friends who have returned, too.

"The cost of living is cheaper, the property taxes – all that is cheaper," Charlie says. "I just wanted to relax."