

**An American Workforce:
Black Immigration and Citizenship in an Expanding South**

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One of the more puzzling, yet understudied, questions in American history is the dramatic reversal of southern attitudes toward immigration in the period between Reconstruction and World War I. During and immediately following Reconstruction, many southerners whole-heartedly embraced immigrant recruitment. States from the Chesapeake to the Gulf opened immigration offices, published fliers advertising their unique benefits, and convened an annual conference devoted specifically to recruiting the foreign-born. Yet by the early twentieth century, the South had become better known for nativism and anti-Catholicism, embodied in organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. What caused this shift? Why did it occur? The answer, I will argue, teaches us a great deal about the linkages of race and class at this pivotal period of industrialization and push for a unified national identity.

Immigration and Race in the Industrializing South

Throughout this period, southern opinion was deeply divided about immigration.¹ At the time the Dillingham Commission was convened in 1907 many southern states had been actively working to recruit immigrants for half a century, with greater or lesser degrees of success. Starting in the 1860s, West Virginia, Virginia, and Louisiana opened

state-run offices of immigrant recruitment. They were joined by Maryland and the Carolinas in the 1880s and 1890s.² By the turn of the 20th century, just about every state below the Mason-Dixon line was engaged in some type of formal recruiting effort to entice the foreign-born to relocate to their borders. Starting in 1904, southern legislators and business interests bolstered their efforts further, convening an annual Conference on Immigration to the Southern States, with daily reports from the conference published in newspapers from cities like New Orleans, Birmingham, Jacksonville, Atlanta, Charleston, and Baltimore to small towns like Natchez, Mississippi and Sunnyside, Arkansas.³

Many northern policy makers embraced these developments as well. As one 1905 editorial published in the *New York Times* by editors who wanted to relocate more foreigners out of New York and into the South, noted: "A perceptible current of Italian immigration is felt in the Mississippi Valley and there is increasing Italian and German settlement in Texas, in Missouri, in some part of the Piedmont region, and even along the Gulf. Unquestionably it could be promoted with advantage, for it is not likely that the undesirable elements could be drawn in large degree to either the agricultural or the manufacturing sections."⁴ The South's need for labor, many in both northern and southern states believed, offered the ideal environment for new, hard-working immigrants, taking the strain off northern cities and increasing development.

At no point was it possible to separate discussions of immigration from those about race. Most recruitment efforts were motivated by a clear desire to replace African American laborers and were conveyed in the language of attracting "desirable immigrants."⁵ "It seems ridiculous that the South should allow herself to be hampered and held back because of the irresponsible blacks. The white race is the dominant factor on this continent. This is our

country, and it is up to us to run it our way," one 1905 editorial in *The Southern Agriculturalist* read, suggesting that recruiting European and Asian immigrants was the only way to save the southern cotton industry.⁶ In 1907, the state of Georgia launched a major effort to recruit Scottish farmers. Maryland focused on Germans and Northern Italians. Agriculturalists in the state of Florida looked to Swedes. For many, these efforts emphasized recruiting Nordic and Anglo-Saxon peoples, who were deemed the most assimilable and among the most advanced civilizations, as reflected in the racial thinking of the day and in the Dillingham Commission's own Dictionary of Races.

African Americans largely resented these efforts. They feared that immigration recruitment would not only further marginalize them, both politically and economically, but worried that growing communities of foreign-born fanned the flames of violence that were already sweeping the South. As one editorial published in Washington, D.C.'s *Colored American* noted in 1902:

The latest report of the immigration bureau is worth studying...We are not a little alarmed at the showing -- not because of objections to foreigners merely as foreigners --- but because our population is being recruited from the most undesirable elements of all Europe and Asia. These strange people are coming more rapidly than we can assimilate them, and their constant increase stands as a menace to the industrial peace and prosperity of our nation...These are the nationalities that unsettle labor conditions here, and to our sorrow, offers the bitterest competition for the domestic service which the Negro once controlled. As waiters, cooks, drivers, barbers, footmen, porters and such employments, they are preferred to Negroes in many quarters and we are not opening enough new avenues to offset this decline. If the Negro were wise he would organize against this unhealthy intrusion as the happiness of the racial family is bound up in this problem of industrial opportunity.⁷

If such international movement was checked, the editors continued, it would not only harm African Americans economically, but would increase lynchings like those that had recently taken place in Virginia.⁸

Not all efforts at immigrant recruitment were ideologically driven, however. Many more were motivated only by the desire to increase profits and to avoid the complications free labor represented. Any pliable labor force would suffice. Legislators in Florida, South Carolina, Mississippi, Maryland and Louisiana lobbied to overturn federal regulations restricting the importation of contract laborers, especially those from China. Henry Flagler worked diligently to recruit Italian laborers to extend his Florida East Coast Railroad south from St. Augustine to the Keys. Scores of Italians were also employed on plantations in Sunnyside, Arkansas, Bryan, Texas, and in the cotton fields of Mississippi.⁹ Scores of immigrants from elsewhere in southern and eastern Europe were employed under peonage conditions in West Virginian coalmines and on the railroads.¹⁰ Concern over peonage, and the drive to more clearly define "peonage" in a legal sense, was among the guiding charges put before the Dillingham Commission as well.

These discussions about importing labor were not just unfolding in isolation. This was also the age of empire when U.S. holdings across the global south were expanding. And in many cases, the fact that the Panama Canal, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the West Indies were less geographically remote from the Gulf Coast states than New York, or even Washington, D.C., was not insignificant. International conglomerates like the United Fruit Company and government organizations like the Interstate Commerce Commission worked to extend holdings and trade across the Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico, recruiting black labor from across the region. At the same time, many African Americans began leaving rural areas across the southern United States and moving north, seeking more regular wages and better social conditions than southern agriculture could afford, yet leaving many large farmers hungry to fill the labor void they left behind. The result was what at least one

scholar has called the beginning of an "extended South for black folk" -- one marked by significant rates of international and intraregional migration that extended across the Caribbean basin and into Latin America, as well as to the northeast and upper Midwest.¹¹

Thus, by the time the Dillingham Commission began its work in 1907, the southern population of the United States was very much on the move. While the total number of foreign born residents never came anywhere near that of the north -- or even approached the goals of its most ardent immigrant recruiters -- at the local level, many found themselves occupying an increasingly international world. Still, three issues loomed large: First, the southern "labor problem" was marked by an ongoing reluctance on the part of agriculturalists to truly engage or support the demands of "free labor" or negotiate with black workers. Second, maintaining rigid separation of "black" and "white" required constant reinforcement in practice and custom, even as locally the region's working class became more ethnically diverse. Ultimately it was this sharp, binary racialization that became synonymous with cultural and national identity.

An Extended South

Debates over these issues coalesced around the subject of black immigrants. Southern representation on the Dillingham Commission was limited, at best, due not so much to the intent of the Commission's chairs as to mortality. In its first incarnation, the committee included two prominent southern members: South Carolina Senator Asbury Latimer and Congressman John L. Burnett of Alabama. Latimer served on the Commission for less than a year before taking ill and dying a short time later. His death was attributed to peritonitis. Senator Anselm McLaurin of Mississippi, who also died within a year, replaced

him. LeRoy Percy took his seat in both the Senate and the Commission. Throughout the active years of the Commission, then, only Congressman Burnett remained a fully active participant.

Although details on the work of the southern representatives on the commission is limited in the archival record, it would appear that while these southern legislators professed a strong desire for immigration restriction, including the implementation of literacy tests, in practice they turned a blind eye to peonage.¹² Burnett was also especially outspoken on the subject of race. As he testified before the Congress in 1908, his time spent in Europe cemented his embrace of northwestern Europeans who descended "from the same great Aryan stock from which you and I spring." But, he concluded, the people of the Mediterranean and Asia "are not our kind of people."¹³ At that time Birmingham, Alabama was among the fastest growing, and most rapidly industrializing cities in the United States at this time and also one of the most ethnically complex.¹⁴ Thus Burnett's fervor grew directly out of local anxieties within his hometown and was shared by a number of other commissioners who were anxious about how similar changes would challenge the social hierarchy of their communities. These views formed the basis for their policy recommendations that increasingly focused on defining the American "race."

Still, the tension between white supremacist ideology and profit remained. Conspicuously absent, at least in the Commission's work, was any discussion of migration within the Western Hemisphere. African Americans were also marginalized, at best, in debates over American character and phenotype, leading some scholars, like political scientist Desmond King, to conclude that the end result was the creation of a "whites only" national ideology.¹⁵ There is no doubt that the strength of the American Eugenics

movement and race played a major role in the construction of U.S. immigration policy and the work of the Commission. But it was not by accident or blindness that the movement within the Western Hemisphere was left largely unchecked by the Dillingham Commission's policy recommendations. Rather, it left the door open to those sources of labor most needed by the nation's big agriculturalists. Black immigrants continued to arrive up to 1910, relatively unchecked, and to move with relative freedom between the mainland, their home nations (most of which were under British or French control), and U.S. colonial holdings across the hemisphere even as public outrage over these migrations and their implications for the make-up of the U.S. citizenry increased apace.

After the Panama Canal was completed in 1914, a growing number of Afro-Caribbean men, and some women, sought work on the U.S. mainland. Where in 1900 only about 25,435 individuals from the Caribbean were living in the United States, that number doubled by 1910, growing to nearly 79,000 by 1920.¹⁶ Although it was numerically small compared to the half million immigrants who hailed from elsewhere in Latin America or the millions of immigrants who came from the northern regions of the hemisphere, the movement of Afro-Caribbean people had social outcomes that gave their migration symbolic importance well beyond that mere numbers would suggest. As Mississippi Senator John Sharp Williams warned in 1914, "The West Indian negro, as a rule, is a man who is accustomed to political and social equality, because the races intermarry in the West Indian Islands; and every West Indian negro who comes to the South comes with that idea in his mind and becomes a source of race conflict and a source of race oppression upon the white man's part, or an invitation and temptation to it, which is as bad for the white man as it is for the negro."¹⁷ His arguments received support from Senator James A. Reed of

Missouri, who introduced an amendment to the federal immigration bill excluding "all members of the African or black race." Although his proposal was soundly defeated in the House (with 74 members supporting, 253 opposing and 99 not voting), the proposal inspired lengthy discussion that at times mirrored debates surrounding the Spanish American War a decade earlier.

Fears of "negro domination" in the South and the desire to increase racial purity were expressed by a range of legislators, again predominately those from the southern states. There were some from the Pacific States who argued that if the Chinese and Japanese were also to be excluded, it only made sense to extend this exclusion to black immigrants as well. But it was Mississippi Congressman Percy E. Quin who put his case most plainly. "[O]f all the barnacles that the civilization of the United States has fastened to it, of all the leper spots, of all the sores, of all the misfortunes that the civilization of this Republic has fastened to the body politic it is the African race, which stands as the worst...[I]t is this black race, this black death, this parasite of race destruction that is fastened upon the Anglo-Saxon people and upon the civilization of the United States. You had just as well to begin to understand that the white people are going to rule this country."¹⁸ His comments were echoed by Louisiana Congressman James Aswell and met with applause from across the chamber.

Equally strong dissenting voices, including those of Illinois Representative Martin Madden and Congressman William M. Calder of New York, whose constituencies included a large number of African American and West Indian voters, spoke out against the amendment. Noting that this type of legislation "would seem to make it impossible for a negro, a citizen of the United States, to reenter this country if he happened to be abroad for

any reason," Madden told the House: "[I]t would be unjust beyond measure to adopt this amendment to the immigration law. One-tenth of the American people are of the black race, and no people in all the world's history has ever been more loyal to a Government than has these people." The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People mounted a major lobbying effort against the bill. Ultimately these voices prevailed. Caribbean immigrants remained unrestricted by legislation in the 1920s. Between 1900 and 1930 close to 150,000 Afro-Caribbean immigrants were admitted to the United States despite periodic efforts to stop their movement.¹⁹ Fewer and fewer, however, chose to remain in the U.S. South, mirroring the migration of the nation's African Americans in their march north to magnet cities like Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Boston.

Outcomes and Significance

What is perhaps most striking about these debates, the intensive study undertaken by the Dillingham commissioners, and their policy recommendations, was that they had relatively little impact upon the international migration of members of the African Diaspora within the Western Hemisphere. While Asian immigrants suffered the harshest effects of the racist ideology of the day in terms of immigration policy, black immigrants continued to enter the United States relatively unrestricted thanks in no small measure to the needs of large agriculturalists and the overriding desire of the U.S. federal government to maintain an open door to trade, money, and labor across the hemisphere.

Citizenship, however, was a different matter. And it was ultimately here that black immigrants were targeted through a range of practices that set the stage for nearly a century of guestworker programs to follow, starting with the temporary worker programs initiated

during World War I, extended in the 1930s and World War II era, continuing well into the 20th and 21st centuries. In other words, while the door to workers remained open, routes to citizenship were quickly cut off, creating an underclass of people essential to the well-being of the American economy but denying them full rights or full access to social services or the ability to become members of the body politic.

This, I would argue, is one of the most significant legacies of the Dillingham Commission's recommendations and subsequent policy decisions made by the U.S. Congress, and one that holds important lessons for us today. Then, as now, nativism -- and the language of restriction -- also took a distinctly racial caste. For immigrants themselves, irrespective of their points of origin, assimilating to the United States meant adapting to the "one drop rule" upon which the United States' peculiar and bifurcated racial dichotomy was based. Yet not only was it often difficult for new arrivals to figure out their place in this racial order, lines of difference were often no less clear for the native-born. Expanding paths of international movement and empire complicated these divides even more. It is no accident that legal efforts to narrowly define and separate black from white proliferated in the same period as new immigration blurred these lines. No where is this more clear than in the early twentieth century South.

NOTES:

¹ Rowland T. Berthoff, "Southern Attitudes toward Immigration, 1865-1914," *The Journal of Southern History* 17, No. 3 (August 1951): 328-360.

² Many other Southern states established similar programs over this period. In the 1880s, West Virginia established a program to attract Northern European immigrants, with a particularly emphasis upon attracting Swiss migrants. Virginia and Louisiana were also among the states that most actively sought to recruit European immigrants over this period,

although there were also others. See: Elizabeth Cometti, "Swiss Immigration to West Virginia, 1864-1884: A Case Study," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (June 1960), 66-87; Bert J. Loewenberg, "Efforts of the South to Encourage Immigration, 1865-1900," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 33 (October 1934), 363-385; Joshua L. Rosenbloom, "Looking for Work, Searching for Workers: U.S. Labor Markets after the Civil War," *Social Science History*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Fall 2004), 377-403. These activities gained momentum in the early 20th century, particularly as emphasis shifted toward attracting the "right" kind of immigrant. See: Robert H. Whitten, ed., *New York State Library Comparative Summary and Index of Legislation*, Bulletin 331 (March 1905), 121-122.

³ For a discussion of these programs, see R. Berthoff, "Southern Attitudes Toward Immigration"; Katharine M. Pruet and John D. Fair, "Immigration, Racism, and 'Alabama on Wheels,'" *Agricultural History* 66, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 19-41; Jeffery G. Strickland, "Ethnicity and Race in the Urban South: German Immigrants and African Americans in Charleston, South Carolina During Reconstruction," Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History, Florida State University (June 2003); and George Brown Tindall, *Natives and Newcomers: Ethnic Southerners and Southern Ethnics* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

⁴ "Immigrants for the South," *New York Times*, February 11, 1905. On exploitation of immigrants sent to southern states, especially of Italian immigrant laborers in North Carolina and Florida, see "Padrones Make Slaves of Poor Immigrants," *New York Times*, June 17, 1906.

⁵ On "desirable immigration" and the South, see: Thomas Dionysius Clark, *The Southern Country Editor* (University of South Carolina Press, 1991, reprint; orig publ. 1948); Robert M. Myers, "'Desirable Immigrants': The Assimilation of Transplanted Yankees in Page and Tourgee," *South Central Review*, 21, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 63-78.

⁶ "Southern Labor," *The Florida Agriculturalist*, November 1, 1905: 707.

⁷ "Dangerous Foreign Competition," *Colored American*, August 16, 1902: A8.

⁸ On relationship between segregation codes and lynching, of immigrants and African Americans alike, see William Fitzhugh Brundage, editor, *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Christopher Waldrep, editor, *Lynching in America: A History in Documents* (NYU Press, 2006): see esp. 22-24, 140-158, 183-193.

⁹ See, for example: Jeremiah William Jenks and William Lauck, *The Immigration Problem* (Funk and Wagnalls, 1911): 83-86. Critics were quick to point out that "probably more than 80 per cent of the rural Italians are Sicilians," distinguishing carefully the less desirable migration of southern Italians from the more desirable movement of northern Italians, who came to the United States in much smaller numbers over this period.

¹⁰ Kenneth R. Bailey, "A Temptation to Lawlessness: Peonage in West Virginia, 1903-1908," *West Virginia History* 50 (1991): 25-45. See also "Peonage and Immigration," *New York Times*, January 19, 1908: A10.

¹¹ Marilyn Bone, "The (Extended) South of Black Folk: Intraregional and Transmigrant Labor in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *American Literature* 79, No. 4 (Dec. 2007): 753-779.

¹² See, for example, Bertram Wyatt Brown, "Leroy Percy and Sunnyside: Planter Mentality and Italian Peonage in the Mississippi Delta," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 50 (Spring 1991): 60-85; and Randolph H. Boehm, "Mary Grace Quakenbos and the Federal Campaign against Peonage," *Shadows over Sunnyside: An Arkansas Plantation in Transition, 1830-1945*, ed. by Jeannie M. Wayne (Little Rock: University of Arkansas Press, 1999): 49-76.

¹³ *Congressional Record*, 60th Congress, 1st Session (April 29, 1908): 5384-86.

¹⁴ One of the most detailed studies of multi-ethnic Birmingham and immigration to the region over this period is Nancy Faires Conklin and Nora Faires, "'Colored' and Catholic: The Lebanese in Birmingham, Alabama," *Crossing the Waters: Arabic Speaking Immigrants to the United States before 1940* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987): 69-84.

¹⁵ Desmond King, *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000): 130-152.

¹⁶ U.S. Census of Population: 1910, Vol. 1, Chapter 7, Table 2: 784; U.S. Census of Population: 1920, Vol. 2, Chapter 6, Tables 3-4: 694-695.

¹⁷ *Congressional Record*, Senate, Vol. 52, Part 1 (Dec. 31, 1914): 805.

¹⁸ *Congressional Record*, House, Vol. 52, part 2 (January 7, 1915): 1134-1135.

¹⁹ In 1924, legislation was proposed by Secretary of Labor Davis that limited the movement of people within the Western Hemisphere and sought to extend quotas to these nations as well. Farm laborers and other workers needed to fill U.S. labor shortages, however, were exempted from these restrictions. See "Jamaica Negro Influx is Checked," *New York World*, July 7, 1924 in NAACP Papers, Vol. 1, Box C-373, Folder: Migration, Manuscripts and Records Division, Library of Congress; "Davis Would Widen Immigration Ban," *New York Times*, Dec. 4, 1924.