

JOHNSTOWN v. THE NEGRO: SOUTHERN MIGRANTS AND THE EXODUS OF 1923

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ONE of the most significant demographic changes in American history was the vast migration of Southern Negroes to the North during and shortly after the First World War. Within a period of a few years hundreds of thousands of Negroes found opportunities in the North that heretofore had been denied to them. However, the migration also made clearer than ever before the national character of American racial problems. Particularly in the early stages, it meant that an economically and culturally oppressed minority was placed in sharp and unaccustomed contact with people in Northern communities who were unprepared for the change. This process provided a dramatic test of the devotion of Americans to their ideals of freedom and equality. In some areas there were heartening instances of successful adjustment. But there were also dismaying failures. An example of the latter was provided during the early 1920's by Johnstown, Pennsylvania, where community apathy and demagogic leadership resulted in misfortune for many of the newcomers.

From 1915 through the 1920's the Negro's northward migration came in two main phases, and Johnstown was affected by both. The first phase reached a peak between 1916 and 1917, and then sharply declined for a few years. A second phase was under way by 1922 and culminated the next year. Prompted by economic and social oppression in the South, and lured by the opportunities presented by labor shortages in the North, vast numbers of Negroes moved off the land, to the cities, and into the North.¹

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¹ On the Negro migration and its causes see: Donald H. Henderson, "The Negro Migration of 1916-1918," *Journal of Negro History*, VI (October, 1921), 383-498; Carter G. Woodson, *A Century of Negro Migration* (Washington: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1918), pp. 167-174; John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1947), pp. 464-465; Monroe N. Work, "The Negro Migration,"

Between 1916 and 1918 over 450,000 migrated to the North, and in the year ending September 1, 1923, the exodus from thirteen Southern states was an estimated 478,700. From 1915 to 1928 a total of about 1,200,000 Negroes had moved from the South to the North, and by 1930 over 20 per cent of the Negroes in the United States lived outside the South.²

Despite these changes, Negroes were still a small proportion of the total Northern population, increasing from 1.8 per cent in 1910 to only 2.3 in 1920 and 3.3 per cent in 1930. In 1920 only about one person in 43 in the North was a Negro.³ Had the migrants been distributed fairly evenly the problems of racial adjustment would probably have been different. But in fact the newcomers settled mainly in a few urban areas in response to the labor needs of Northern industry, and some cities experienced tremendous increases in the size of their Negro population.⁴ As a large industrial state, Pennsylvania was a major recipient of this migration. The census of 1920 showed that Pennsylvania was the twelfth state in total Negro population, and the first outside of the South. With 4.5 per cent of its population Negro by 1930, Pennsylvania was outranked in this category only by New Jersey and Ohio among Northern states. In 1920 and 1930 over 60 per cent of Pennsylvania's Negroes lived in Pittsburgh or Philadelphia, and a considerably higher proportion (86.6 per cent in 1930) were classified as urban.⁵

Such were the broad outlines of the Negro migration of which the influx into Johnstown was a small part. In the early twentieth

Southern Workman, LIII (May, 1924), 202-212; Joseph A. Hill, "Recent Northward Migration of the Negro," *Monthly Labor Review*, XVIII (March, 1924), 475-488; United States, Department of Labor, Division of Negro Economics, *Negro Migration in 1916-17* (Washington, 1919), and United States, Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Negroes in the United States, 1920-32* (Washington, 1935).

² Maurice R. Davis, *Negroes in American Society* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1949), p. 94; Elbert Lee Tatum, *The Changed Political Thought of the Negro, 1915-1940* (New York: Exposition Press, 1951), p. 55; "Negro Migration in 1923," *Monthly Labor Review*, XVIII (April, 1924), 762-764; Charles S. Johnson, "The Changing Economic Status of the Negro," *American Academy of Political and Social Science, Annals*, CXXXX (November, 1928), 131; *Negroes in the United States, 1920-32*, p. 5.

³ *Negroes in the United States, 1920-32*, p. 13; Hill, "Recent Northward Migration," pp. 480-482.

⁴ Eric D. Walrond, "The Negro Exodus From the South," *Current History*, XVIII (September, 1923), 942.

⁵ *Negroes in the United States, 1920-32*, pp. 6, 7, 14, 32, and 53.

century Johnstown was a rapidly growing city whose population had jumped from 8,380 in 1880 to 67,327 in 1920. Like many Northern communities it had a small, established Negro population that dated in part well back into the nineteenth century. But from 1910 to 1920 the number of Negroes increased 262 per cent, from 462 to 1,671, and considerably more were added during the influx of 1922-23.⁶ While the precise number is not known, some informed estimates placed Johnstown's Negro population as high as 3,000 by the summer of 1923.⁷ Although they remained a small percentage of the city's total population, the newcomers aroused the suspicions and ultimately the fears of many of the older inhabitants.

Johnstown's principal economic attraction was the Cambria Steel Company. Founded in 1854 as the Cambria Iron Company, it soon became one of America's largest ironworks. In 1898 it was reorganized as the Cambria Steel Company, and its success was obviously a major factor in the rapid growth of the city. In November, 1922, the Bethlehem Steel Company purchased the Cambria works, bringing it into the great steel combine headed by the aggressive and able Charles M. Schwab.⁸ Thus as racial tension arose in Johnstown in 1923 some critics heaped the blame upon the new outside leadership. Indeed, the great steel companies of western Pennsylvania and Ohio had been responsible for bringing in increasing numbers of Negro workers since 1916, including many strikebreakers during the great steel strike of 1919. By 1923 Negroes accounted for 21 per cent of all steel workers in the Pittsburgh district. Bethlehem Steel was not entirely satisfied with its Negro labor, however, and in 1923 began importing trainloads of Mexicans.⁹ Thus Johnstown, like other steel centers, had

⁶ United States, Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1921* (Washington, 1922), p. 58; *Statistical Abstract: 1923* (Washington, 1924), pp. 42-43.

⁷ Report of John N. English to the Attorney General of Pennsylvania, p. 11, in Gifford Pinchot Papers, box 2317, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress. Hereafter cited as English Report.

⁸ Wayland F. Dunaway, *A History of Pennsylvania* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1935), pp. 654-655; Gertrude G. Schroeder, *The Growth of the Major Steel Companies, 1900-1950* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1953), pp. 47-50, 102.

⁹ David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Non-Union Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 184, 186, 254-255, 266-267; C. S. Johnson, "Changing Economic Status of the Negro," p. 131.

a growing number of Mexicans as well, although in 1923 Southern Negroes made up the bulk of the newly arrived labor force.

The big influx strained Johnstown's resources. The Negroes were housed in several parts of the city, the largest number being segregated into grossly inadequate quarters in the Rosedale section three miles north of the business district. Bethlehem Steel owned most of the property in this area, including a number of bunk-houses for male laborers. Living conditions were deplorable. After a visit to Rosedale during the spring of 1923, Dean Kelly Miller of Howard University's Junior College reported that he had never seen "such pitiable conditions as prevailed in Johnstown." The "limitations and restrictions" were such that only two families owned their homes. Moreover the Negroes, largely poor, untutored newcomers from the South, had no places of amusement and little outlet for their energies other than "immorality and gambling." Dean Miller concluded that the chief fault lay with the citizens of Johnstown in allowing such degrading conditions to exist.¹⁰ Regardless of who was to blame, Johnstown's response to the influx of Southern Negroes was inadequate, with the result that conditions became potentially dangerous.

At the end of August, 1923, an incident occurred in Rosedale that brought Johnstown's racial problems to a head. On the evening of August 30 a policeman, Joseph Grachen, was sent to investigate an alleged disorder at the residence of Robert A. Young, a Negro living in Rosedale. Grachen checked at Young's home and left after being assured that all was well. Young and a companion then drove to nearby Franklin where they had some drinks. On his return his car struck a telegraph pole. The same officer Grachen came upon the accident and was recognized by Young. Apparently crazed by drink and possibly drugs, Young shot and wounded Grachen. He then retreated to a nearby shed from which he engaged a detail of policemen and county detectives in a pitched battle. In a short while Young and two policemen were killed and several other officers were seriously wounded, one of whom later died.¹¹

¹⁰ Kelly Miller to editor of Philadelphia *Public Ledger*, letter dated September 28, 1923, in Gifford Pinchot Papers, box 2317. See also *Johnstown Democrat*, August 20, 1923, p. 12.

¹¹ English Report, pp. 1-2; *Johnstown Democrat*, August 31, 1923, p. 1.

Deplorable as this incident was, it was in no sense a race riot.¹² Fifteen Negroes were arrested after the shooting, and many others were questioned. But investigation soon showed that only Young had been involved, and all the suspects were released.¹³ Nevertheless, racial tension ran high for a while, and threats to burn down Rosedale were heard. The shooting, which seemed to place the white community on the defensive against aggressions of the Negro newcomer, was ideal for Ku Klux Klan propagandists. Since its organization in Pennsylvania in 1921, the Klan had shown considerable strength in the Johnstown area.¹⁴ On the night after the shooting the Klan staged a demonstration and burned a cross on a nearby hill. But the police kept a close watch on Rosedale, and no violence ensued.¹⁵ Still, the Negro ghettos remained. The situation certainly called for immediate and intelligent planning to improve the living conditions and enlarge the opportunities of the city's colored population.

Unfortunately Joseph Cauffiel, Johnstown's erratic mayor, decided upon a simpler and more direct approach. Mayor Cauffiel had a record of arbitrary actions, including a well-publicized incident in 1922 when, despite prohibition, he announced to the city's saloon keepers that they could sell real beer.¹⁶ In an interview with a reporter from the *Johnstown Democrat*, published on September 7, 1922, Mayor Cauffiel issued a series of peremptory orders that were intended to drive the Negroes out of Johnstown. According to the *Democrat's* reporter, Mayor Cauffiel said: "I want every negro who has lived here less than seven years to pack up his belongings and get out." More explicitly he added:

¹² With more sensationalism than accuracy, the *New York Times*, September 1, 1923, p. 11, carried the story under the headline, "Rioting Negroes Kill Police in Johnstown." The Johnstown papers printed much less inflammatory stories.

¹³ English Report, p. 3; *Johnstown Democrat*, August 31, 1923, p. 1, and September 1, 1923, p. 16; *Johnstown Tribune*, September 1, 1923, editorial, p. 6.

¹⁴ Emerson H. Loucks, *The Ku Klux Klan in Pennsylvania. A Study in Nativism* (New York and Harrisburg: Telegraph Press, 1936), p. 27. One estimate claimed there were some 4,000 Klansmen in Johnstown at the time. See *Survey*, LI (October 15, 1923), 75.

¹⁵ English Report, p. 3; *Johnstown Democrat*, September 1, 1923, p. 16.

¹⁶ English Report, pp. 5-6; *New York Times*, September 15, 1923, p. 17. Other examples of Cauffiel's peculiar behavior as mayor can be found in Gifford Pinchot Papers, box 676.

"For their own safety I am ordering all newly arrived negro citizens of Johnstown to leave town." Furthermore he announced that Johnstown would take immediate steps to ban importation of Negro or Mexican laborers; that until further notice all Negroes in Johnstown were forbidden to hold any public gathering, social or otherwise, except church services, and that he would compel every Negro visiting Johnstown in the future to register with the mayor or police, and that none would be allowed in unless he could first prove that he was law-abiding. After calling upon the citizens of Johnstown to help him carry out his order, Mayor Cauffiel concluded this remarkable statement as follows: "I have gone over this thing carefully. This is not a hasty decision for me to give out. I have worked over our negro problem in Johnstown and have kept on the job night and day during the last week trying to work out a solution. My mind is made up: The negroes must go back from where they came. They are not wanted in Johnstown."¹⁷

Such was Mayor Cauffiel's broadside against the newcomers. Its justice and wisdom was another matter. Certainly the recent confrontation by the older inhabitants with considerable numbers of poor Southern Negroes and Mexicans meant that Johnstown faced delicate and serious problems of racial adjustment. According to Mayor Cauffiel there was much feeling against the Bethlehem Steel Company for bringing in the new workers, and their crime rate was high. The shooting clearly exacerbated the situation. Mayor Cauffiel later claimed that after that incident "our citizens were aroused and we had difficulty maintaining order."¹⁸ Actually no violence occurred after August 30, and in defending his actions Mayor Cauffiel may have exaggerated somewhat. Nevertheless considerable tension did exist, a fact indicated by the reported departure of several hundred Negroes between August 30 and September 7.¹⁹ But the mayor's examination of the problem was superficial. At no time, while mayor, had he bothered to visit Rosedale and study conditions for himself.²⁰ Nor does it seem possible that Mayor Cauffiel had fully considered the broader

¹⁷ *Johnstown Democrat*, September 7, 1923, p. 14.

¹⁸ Mayor Cauffiel to Governor Pinchot, September 18, 1923, Gifford Pinchot Papers, box 676; English Report, p. 7; *Johnstown Democrat*, September 7, 1923, p. 14.

¹⁹ *Johnstown Democrat*, September 8, 1923, p. 18.

²⁰ English Report, pp. 7-8.

implications of his action, nor the opprobrium that would surely come in the long run to himself and his city.

Conceivably, however, Mayor Cauffiel hoped that his order would win him support in his bid for renomination at the Republican primary on September 18. Certainly he must have been aware of the apparent strength of the Klan in the area. On the evening of September 7, local Klansmen indicated their approval of his position by burning crosses on hills all around the city.²¹ The *Johnstown Democrat* strongly condemned Mayor Cauffiel's action as a dangerous move that would "appeal in particular to the Ku Kluxers and other folks who cherish race prejudice," and it intimated that he was attempting to capitalize on "hatreds and prejudices for political purposes."²² However, despite the patent illegality and injustice of the mayor's order, local reaction against it was slight. Not until the story became known outside of Johnstown did effective criticism arise.

In the meantime much damage had been done. Mayor Cauffiel did not actually communicate his ideas in a formal, written order to the police, nor did any local officials attempt to deport any Negroes or Mexicans.²³ But the evidence shows that he acted as though he intended his order to be carried out. For example, as a judge of the local police court on several occasions the mayor summarily ordered Negro defendants to leave town forthwith.²⁴ He also told the general manager of Bethlehem Steel's Johnstown plant that he wanted the company to ship out all its Negro workers.²⁵ Furthermore Mayor Cauffiel knew well the effect such an order, coupled with the general tension and Klan cross-burnings, would have upon much of the Negro community. Thus many Negroes, in fear or in ignorance of their rights, did indeed heed the mayor's order, and a considerable exodus began. The esti-

²¹ *Johnstown Democrat*, September 8, 1923, p. 18.

²² *Johnstown Democrat*, September 8, 1923, editorial, p. 6.

²³ English Report, p. 15.

²⁴ *Johnstown Democrat*, September 17, 1923, p. 8; report by Pennsylvania State Police Sergeant George W. Freeman, Gifford Pinchot Papers, box 676. Freeman cited as an example a case in which Mayor Cauffiel addressed a defendant as follows: "Nigger, do you know what would happen to you down South? Well I'll tell you. They would take you out and hang you. You have fifteen (15) minutes to leave Johnstown, one (1) hour to leave the county, five (5) hours to leave the State, and seven (7) hours to get below the Mason-Dixon Line."

²⁵ Report of George W. Freeman.

mates of the number who left vary greatly, but it is clear that at least several hundred departed. Visiting Johnstown between September 21 and 23, an investigator from the Pennsylvania attorney general's office reported that three-fourths or more of the homes in Rosedale were vacant and abandoned, and concluded that about 500 Negroes had departed from Rosedale alone.²⁶ In short, even without formal implementation of his order, Mayor Cauffiel achieved a considerable measure of the ends he desired.

Not until the plight of Johnstown's Negroes was reported in the big city press did serious opposition to this injustice materialize. On September 15 the *New York Times* carried a story under the heading "Johnstown Expels 2,000 Workingmen."²⁷ Immediately thereafter a number of individuals and groups sprang to the defense of Johnstown's Negroes. James Weldon Johnson, Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, wired a protest to Governor Gifford Pinchot in which he requested that steps be taken "to protect the colored citizens of Johnstown against the Ku Klux Klans methods of Mayor Cauffiel."²⁸ Mexican authorities also took action to protect their nationals. The consul at Philadelphia protested to both Mayor Cauffiel and Governor Pinchot, and finally the embassy complained to the State Department, with the result that acting Secretary of State William Phillips requested Pinchot to correct any injustices done to the Mexicans and take steps to protect their rights.²⁹

Governor Pinchot's response was forthright. From Mayor Cauffiel he requested a full statement of the facts, and to James Weldon Johnson he pledged that "the whole power of this commonwealth will be used if necessary to maintain constitutional rights."³⁰ The mayor's answer, however, was less satisfactory. In his reply to Governor Pinchot, Cauffiel noted the recent shooting and asserted unfairly that Johnstown had "been over run by many negroes

²⁶ English Report, pp. 4, 11.

²⁷ *New York Times*, September 15, 1923, p. 17.

²⁸ James Weldon Johnson to Governor Pinchot, September 15, 1923, Gifford Pinchot Papers, box 2317.

²⁹ F. A. Pesqueira to Governor Pinchot, September 16, 1923; William Phillips to Governor Pinchot, September 19, 1923, Gifford Pinchot Papers, box 2317.

³⁰ Governor Pinchot to J. W. Johnson, September 18, 1923, and to Mayor Cauffiel, September 18, 1923. Gifford Pinchot Papers, box 2317.

from the South, paroled from the southern prisons." As for the deportation order, he explained that "only the lawless ones were advised to leave," for their own protection and in order to preserve the peace and the "good name" of the city. He concluded his defense with the incredible statement that there had been "no discrimination against the black race."³¹

Finding this explanation inadequate, Governor Pinchot requested the state attorney general's office to investigate, with the result that Deputy Attorney General John N. English visited Johnstown from September 21 to 23. An investigator was also sent out by the state police. Faced with considerable outside censure and pressure from Harrisburg, Mayor Cauffiel attempted to picture his action as far milder than it had been. Thus to Deputy Attorney General English he explained, as he had to the governor, that he had meant only the "undesirable" and "criminal element." Later he flatly denied having *ordered* the Negroes and Mexicans to leave.³² But this denial was unconvincing. As late as September 18, after he had written his reply to Governor Pinchot, Mayor Cauffiel repeated the word "order" to reporters, and stated: "I am not ashamed of that order and I contend that I have the backing of every law-abiding citizen in Johnstown on the stand I took."³³ The original report of his interview and order was clear and explicit and went unchallenged by Mayor Cauffiel until he found himself embarrassed by outside criticism.

In the official investigations the evidence presented and the conclusions drawn about the mayor's actions were clearly damning. On October 2 Governor Pinchot sent a letter censuring his conduct and admonishing him "to observe the law" and bring his "actions within bounds which are legal and provided by law."³⁴ Meanwhile the voters of Johnstown also expressed their disapproval. If Mayor Cauffiel's order had been politically inspired, a point he emphatically denied, it had been to no avail. In the primary on September 18 he ran a poor fourth in his bid for

³¹ Mayor Cauffiel to Governor Pinchot, September 18, 1923, Gifford Pinchot Papers, box 676.

³² English Report, p. 8 and Exhibit A; *Johnstown Tribune*, September 22, 1923, p. 16.

³³ *Johnstown Democrat*, September 19, 1923, p. 16.

³⁴ Governor Pinchot to Mayor Cauffiel, October 2, 1923, Gifford Pinchot Papers, box 676.

the Republican mayoralty nomination.³⁵ But the mayor's political downfall, however richly deserved, did not alter the fact that hundreds of Negroes and Mexicans had fled.³⁶ For them Johnstown had failed as a place of hope and opportunity.

The Negroes who came to Johnstown after 1915 were only a very small proportion of the vast number of migrants from the South, and their experience in September, 1923, was certainly not typical.³⁷ Of course the Southern Negroes discovered that the North was a long way from paradise, but a good many found valuable new opportunities. As a rule they received far higher wages and had better schools for their children. And they could vote. At the worst, tensions erupted into deadly racial war, as at East St. Louis in 1916, Chicago and Washington in 1919, and Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921. If Johnstown had failed to provide the best conditions, at least it had not emulated the worst. But many of the issues raised by the presence of the new Negro population in Johnstown were similar to those elsewhere and had a broader significance.

In the first place, we can observe in Johnstown not only the tension between Negro and white, but also the cleavage between the old, established Negro and the newcomer. The former, if not loved, was at least tolerated. But incidents such as the shooting on August 30 were likely to increase the feeling against all Negroes, for as the number rose it became more and more difficult for the white community to maintain a neat distinction between old and new, or good and bad, Negroes. Mayor Cauffiel, of course, tried to do this in his removal order, by making it applicable only to those who had not been in Johnstown for at least seven years. He even asserted that "our old native negroes will stand by me on this issue." They were "law-abiding," while the others were "riff-raff."³⁸ But despite this distinction, the old Negro as well as the new was subject to Cauffiel's restrictions on

³⁵ *Johnstown Tribune*, September 19, 1923, p. 5; *Johnstown Democrat*, September 19, 1923, p. 16.

³⁶ As late as 1930 Johnstown's Negro population was only 1,444 compared to 1,650 in 1920, and to estimates as high as 3,000 for the summer of 1923. See *Negroes in the United States, 1920-32*, p. 64, and English Report, p. 11.

³⁷ Franklin, *From Slavery To Freedom*, p. 435, notes, however, some towns in Ohio and Indiana that went so far as to forbid Negro residents.

³⁸ *Johnstown Democrat*, September 7, 1923, p. 14.

assembly, and all suffered from heightened tension. It was a graphic example of the increase of prejudice as the total number of Negroes rose, and how that prejudice inevitably reflected upon all Negroes, not just the newcomers.³⁹

Secondly, while the racial problems in Johnstown were not in themselves of major political importance, they did illustrate the fact that the Negro did not necessarily find friends among Northern Republicans. Of course once Governor Pinchot, a Republican, was apprised of the situation, his position was all that could have been hoped for. But the damage had been done locally by a Republican mayor, in a heavily Republican city. It is true, Mayor Cauffiel was not renominated, but his Republican opponents were not reported to be critical of his anti-Negro position. In the local press the *Johnstown Democrat* strongly attacked Mayor Cauffiel's action, but the *Johnstown Tribune*, a Republican organ, carried virtually no news of the attempted ouster and was silent editorially on the whole situation. Episodes of this sort helped contribute to the Negro's growing disillusionment with the Republican party.

Finally the plight of the Negroes in Johnstown provided another illustration of the fact that the northern migration had made the racial issue a problem not just for the South but for the whole nation. Prejudice was no Southern monopoly. A Pennsylvania mayor showed he was as capable of the demagogic use of racial tensions as was a Southern redneck. And until an isolated city was spotlighted with unfavorable national publicity, the local citizens failed to react decisively to protect the rights of their colored neighbors. The difficult problems of racial adjustment called for intelligent and courageous planning. They could not be solved by drift and inaction. If responsible citizens would not lead, the inept and demagogic would inevitably try their hand. In this regard Johnstown's experience was a lesson for the nation.

³⁹ On this point see Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York: Harper, 1944), p. 196. George A. Myers, the Negro barber, describes a similar condition in Cleveland in a letter to James Ford Rhodes, February 10, 1921, in John A. Garraty, editor, *The Barber and the Historian. The Correspondence of George A. Myers and James Ford Rhodes, 1910-1923* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State Historical Society, 1956), p. 124. For a description of the effects of the Southern migrants upon the old Negroes in a Connecticut town see Frank F. Lee, *Negro and White in Connecticut Towns* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1961), pp. 26-37.