

THE NEGRO MIGRANT IN PITTSBURGH

A Review of the Conditions
100 Years Ago

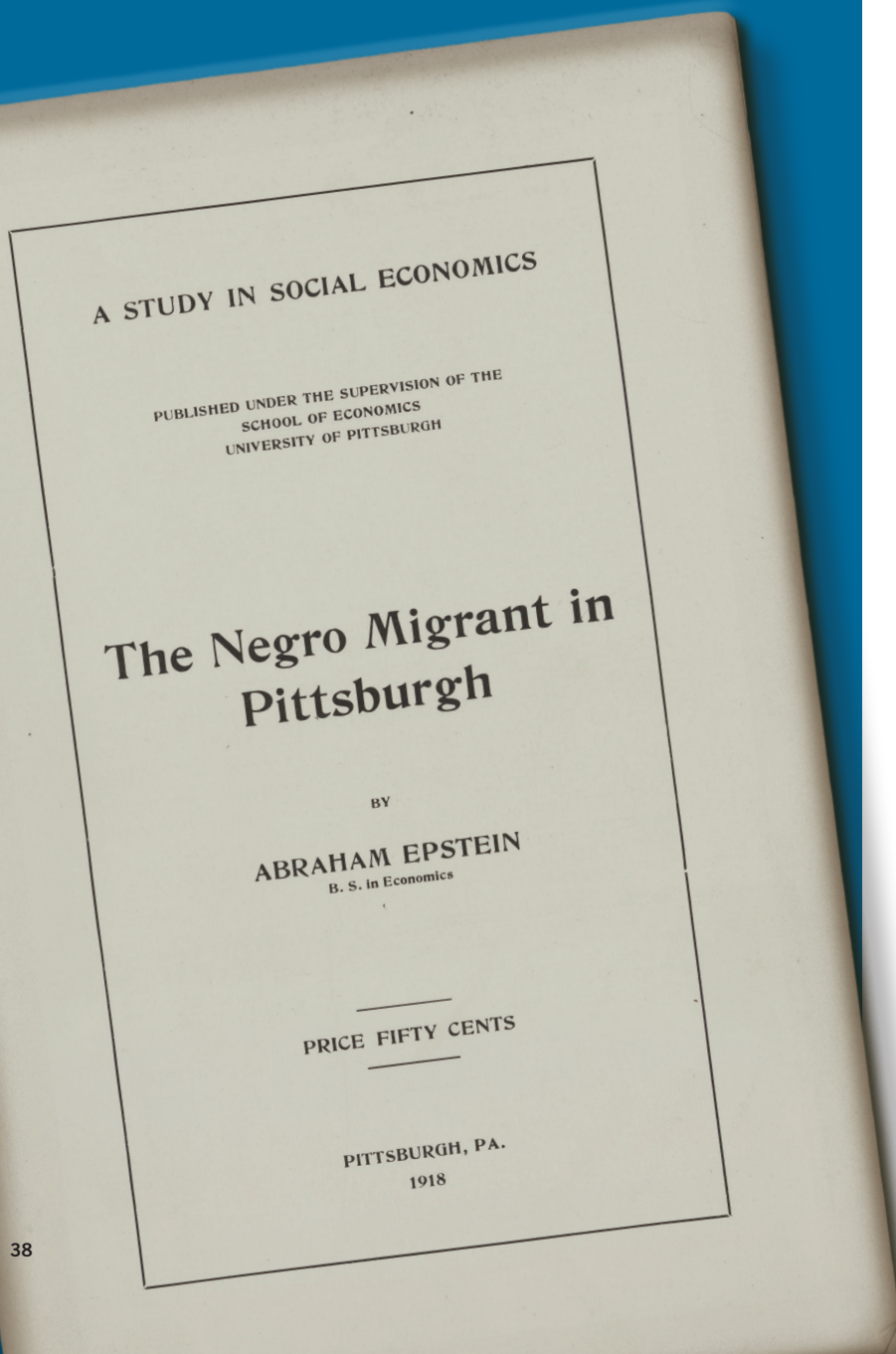
By Samuel W. Black, Director of
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In 1918, economist Abraham Epstein conducted and published a study of the experiences and conditions of life among southern African American migrants in Pittsburgh. Epstein was a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, earning a bachelor of arts in social economy in 1917 and a graduate degree the following year. His graduate work centered on the topic of African American migrants and the sociological study was his thesis. Over the next 100 years, his work became an authority for understanding the conditions faced by African Americans during the Great Migration. Epstein analyzed various aspects of the migrant experience and offered statistical data to drive home certain points that outlined the influx of African Americans, mainly to the east side of the city

Abraham Epstein was born in Russia and at the age of 18, in 1910, immigrated with his family to the U.S. Many Jews feeling the pinch between the weakened Russian Monarchy and the rising Bolshevik revolution immigrated to the U.S. They were among the two million eastern European Jews to come here between 1880 and 1924. Epstein used his personal knowledge in migration to express his study of African American migrants to Pittsburgh.

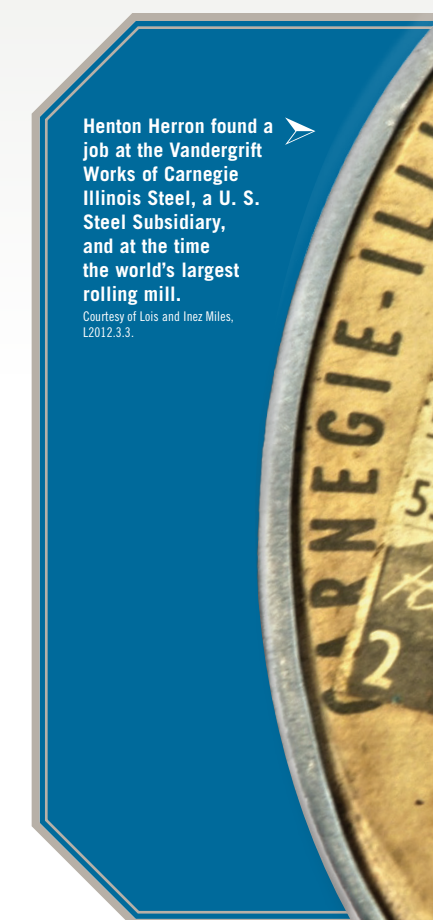
The study, as Epstein explained, aimed to “contribute toward the orientation and adjustment of the newcomers in our community.”¹ His goal was to present data as a basis for further study and analysis. It contained statistics, graphs, tables, and quotes detailing aspects of Black life in employment, migratory numbers, health, education, crime, and housing. It is an empirical study with seeming objectivity; however, some curious language reflects cultural or racial bias of the author, using adjectives such as shiftless and ignorant. Despite the derogatory language, Epstein was able to present information that had not yet been quantified, and the study became the first major sociological view of African American migrants in Pittsburgh.



Some numbers seemed reasonable but Epstein realizes the impact of American racism on migrant experience. Epstein's study may have been the first centered on Pittsburgh, but it was not the first aimed at an urban northern African American population.

Nearly 20 years earlier, in 1899, historian and sociologist W.E.B. DuBois conducted the first major study of an urban black population with *The Philadelphia Negro*. DuBois' study was the first sociological work to use statistically based data in social science. DuBois outlined the importance of such data to clearly understand the impact and status of black life in the urban metropolis. Epstein followed DuBois' route closely. Given that Epstein's published study was much shorter and focused on a smaller population than DuBois' work, Epstein's statistically strong work was absent mapping that would have given an audience, a century later, a greater understanding of the demographic landscape. Regardless, his findings came at a time when the African American was progressive and determined. For example, Black Pittsburghers debated whether to participate in World War I. DuBois was at the center of this debate, choosing that African Americans should serve to gain greater democratic rights after the war. Others felt that African Americans had already served in every war in the nation's history and were due those rights already.

Epstein's study focused on the WWI years of 1915–1917 that halted European immigration most. He continued to point out that increases in African American employment—the signature reason for the influx of southern migrants—was the need for unskilled labor in Pittsburgh steel and mining industries during the war in Europe. The war basically halted European immigration. His work illustrated the recruitment of many southern migrants by war industries. Because the war had stopped European immigration,



Pittsburgh's industries in mining, trades, and steel needed the labor that millions of southern blacks could offer. Skilled and unskilled laborers migrated to Pittsburgh heeding the call of the industrial city.

That migration swelled the African American population to 39,000 by 1918. Sixty percent came from the southern states of Alabama, Georgia, Virginia, North Carolina, with most from Alabama. Thirty percent of migrants were between the ages of 18-25 and were single men.² Most of the migrants settled in the Hill District, but those that found work in mills settled close to those jobs such as in McKeesport, Braddock, Rankin, and Lawrenceville.

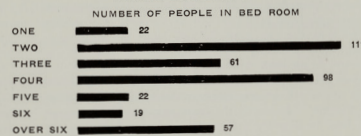


An example from the History Center's collections is Henton Herron, who migrated from Alabama in 1910 and found work in the steel mills of Vandergrift.³ His experience in the mills of Alabama afforded him an unskilled role at Vandergrift. He would settle in McKeesport and send for his family after establishing his work in the mill.

Many other African Americans who found work in the mills were largely in unskilled and dangerous occupations in the mills. Epstein outlines the number of African

Of the men without families here, only twenty-two out of more than three hundred had individual bed rooms. Twenty-five percent lived four in a room, and twenty-five percent lived in rooms used by more than four people. Again only thirty-seven percent slept in separate beds, fifty percent slept two in a bed, and thirteen percent sleep three or more in a bed.

TABLE NUMBER III



The conditions in these rooming houses often beggar description. Sleeping quarters are provided not only in bedrooms, but also in attics, basements, dining rooms and kitchens. In many instances, houses in which these rooms are located are dilapidated dwellings with the paper torn off, the plaster sagging from the naked lath, the windows broken, the ceiling low and damp, and the whole room dark, stuffy and unsanitary. In one or two instances, these rooms, with more than six people sleeping in them at one time, have practically no openings for either light or air.



A Typical Boarding House on Lower Wylie Avenue.

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In the more crowded sections, beds are rented on a double shift basis. Men who work at night sleep during the day in the beds vacated by day workers. There is no space in these rooms, except for beds and as many of them are crowded in as can be possibly accommodated.

There is rarely a place in these rooms for even suitcases or trunks. Under such circumstances the rooms can be kept clean with difficulty, and there is apparently no disposition to wrestle with the dirt and litter. Very few of these sleeping rooms have more than two windows each, and many have only one window. Only a few are provided with bath rooms, while a great number have the water and toilets in the yards or other places outside the house. Many of these roomers complain that often they are not given any soap, and are never given more than one towel a week.

TABLE NUMBER IV

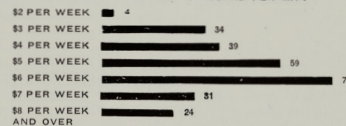
Rents Paid in Rooming Houses by 305 Roomers

Rents Paid in Rooming Houses by 305 Roomers	Percentage
168 paid \$1.50 per week	55
103 paid \$1.75 per week	34
13 paid \$2.00 per week	4.25
14 paid \$3.00 per week	4.25
7 paid Over \$3.00	2.5
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The rents paid by these roomers are shown in table number IV. They varied from \$1.50 to \$3.00 per week, and in a few instances were as high as \$4.00 per week. In a number of cases, the men also board in the same place in which they room, paying from five to seven or eight dollars per week for food and shelter.

TABLE NUMBER V.

ONE WEEK'S COST OF BOARD PER MAN



The situation in the camps is not better than that in rooming houses. In one railroad camp visited, the men were

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Americans in the major steel producing industries. In 1916, Carnegie Steel, the largest employer of black steel workers, employed 4,000 African Americans, with 95% unskilled labor, making 30¢ per hour, for 8 to 12 hours per day. Jones & Laughlin employed only 1,500 with 100% unskilled, with the same pay, but working 10 hours per day. Westinghouse Electric employed 900, with 90% unskilled, with 28-30¢ per hour for 10 hours of work per day.⁴

Epstein underscored the percentage of unskilled labor, noting that it was not that the workers were unskilled but that the positions blacks were given were in the unskilled, most dangerous work at the mills, regardless of skill or experience. These positions included the cleaning of the crucible pits, and other dirty, unskilled jobs with low pay.

Migrants also faced discrimination in employment, especially in union jobs. Blacks

had been used as strike breakers going back to 1875. During Epstein's study, the same condition locked out black skilled tradesmen from work. In June 1917, P. Bobonis, a Puerto Rican, Oberlin College graduate, and father of future *Pittsburgh Courier* and Mercy Hospital marketing director, Regis Bobonis, migrated from Colorado. He went to the employment bureau looking for work but was denied despite being a member of the Colorado Trade Union. The Pittsburgh union discriminated against Bobonis citing that white carpenters would walk off work if they had to work with a black person. Trade Unions would collect dues from black workers but not give them work. Bobonis eventually found work with the Dravo Contracting Company.⁵

Epstein's narrative also expressed the desperate housing conditions for migrants. The same conditions criticized by *Pittsburgh Courier* editors a few years earlier found

migrants living in basement rooms, shacks, and abandoned tenements. His statistics reveal migrants paying \$1.50-\$3.00 per week for rent.⁶ Few of the dwellings were equipped with heat, running water, or clear of rats, infestation, and proper construction. The poor housing conditions impacted the health of migrants: mortality rates stood at 527 in the first seven months of 1917. Most of the deaths were a result of disease such a pneumonia, tuberculosis, and heart disease. Eighty-seven of the deaths were of the ages five and under, while the majority of the 527 deaths were from the ages of 40-60.⁷ The young and working age were the most vulnerable.

Epstein's crime report came with a caveat. He noted that reports of rising crime among African Americans was the talk around town. Epstein noted "A colored probation officer, for instance asserted that the juvenile delinquency among her people had at least doubled during

TABLE NUMBER VII
Rents Paid by 142 Families Investigated

\$10 PER MONTH	41
\$15 PER MONTH	60
\$20 PER MONTH	18
\$25 PER MONTH	13
OVER \$25	10

The sections formerly designated as Negro quarters, have been long since congested beyond capacity by the influx of newcomers, and a score of new colonies have sprung up in hollows and ravines, on hill slopes and along river banks, by railroad tracks and in mill-yards. In many instances the dwellings are those which have been abandoned by foreign white people since the beginning of the present war. In some cases they are structures once condemned by the City Bureau of Sanitation, but opened again only to accommodate the influx



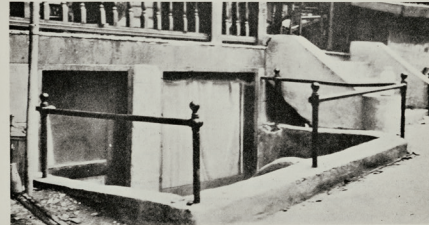
A Row of Houses Unused for Several Years Until the Present Influx from the South.

from the South. Very few of these houses are equipped with gas. Coal and wood are used both for cooking and heating. During the hot days of July, the visitor found in several instances a red hot stove in a room which was being used as kitchen, dining room, parlor and bedroom. This, however, did not seem to bother the newcomers, as many of the women, being unaccustomed to the use of gas, and fearful of it, preferred the more accustomed method of cooking.

A few of these families were found living in so-called "basements", more than three-fourths under ground, a direct violation

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of a municipal ordinance.¹ Some rooms had no other opening than a door. The rents paid for such quarters are often beyond belief. In one of these rooms in the Hill District, where only the upper halves of the windows were level with the sidewalk, lived a man, his wife and their five children, the eldest of whom was sixteen years old. The rental was six dollars per week. Another family paid twenty-five dollars per month for three small rooms on the ground floor. The kitchen was so damp and close that the investigator found it impossible to remain for long, because it was difficult to breathe. The ceilings in many of the houses visited were very low, hardly higher than six or seven feet and the rooms were often piled high with furniture. That the owners of these houses cared little about improving their houses was indicated in several cases by the fact that water faucets and toilets had been out of commission for months, and no effort at repair had been made.



"Basement" Occupied by a Migrant Family. The Only Opening in this Dwelling Appears in the Picture.

Because of these bad conditions many peculiar maladjustments exist. A certain man lived in a rooming house, while his young wife and baby lived in another place. In addition to his own rent and board, he paid ten dollars a week for the keep of his wife and baby. In another case, a family was forced to pay six dollars a month storage on the furniture which they had brought from the South, because their new quarters were too cramped to accommodate it.

¹Pittsburgh Sanitary Code of 1913, Sections 122, 123 and 124, pages 75, 76 and 77.

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the last year, and she was greatly surprised when an examination of the records disclosed a very considerable decrease in the cases.²⁸ The crime statistics were taken from the most densely populated, predominantly black part of the city. In 1917, there were 3,092 arrests made with the majority for suspicion, disorderly conduct, and public drunkenness. There were only six murders reported for the year⁹ with 1,716 dismissals reported. While Epstein was tabulating his report of crime, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was tabulating a report of lynching in the U.S. The Pittsburgh branch of the NAACP was founded in 1915 and quickly began to impact the socio-political mobility of African Americans. Statistics indicate that 142 African Americans were lynched in the U.S. from 1915 to 1917.

In his conclusion, Epstein offered several approaches to deal with the conditions that

African American migrants faced in Pittsburgh. He promoted a racial cooperation approach that placed the newly formed Urban League of Pittsburgh at the forefront of such movement. The weakness of Epstein's study is that it never mentioned the existing institutions in the African American community that were working to improve the lives of migrants. The black church and independent organizations and agencies had spent decades actively addressing the needs of migrants but were absent in the evaluation by Epstein. Even the efforts of the *Pittsburgh Courier* in recruiting workers and reporting the issues they faced in Pittsburgh was largely absent from the study.

A 21st-century reader may find the study strange in that it presents data that is remarkably different from our own, while the rate of unemployment, housing, health, and crime continue to be some of the major issues facing African Americans in Pittsburgh

today. Contemporary society reveals very low numbers of migrants in Pittsburgh. No longer an industrial base with a plethora of unskilled labor, the technological workforce of today has not proven to be as welcoming as some might think. My wife and I are migrants to Pittsburgh but came here as professionals. The question is, to what degree are the issues of 1918 the same issues in 2018?

¹ Epstein, Abraham, *The Negro Migrant in Pittsburgh* (University of Pittsburgh School of Economics, 1918) p. 3.

² Ibid., p. 18-25.

³ From Slavery to Freedom exhibition, Senator John Heinz History Center.

⁴ Epstein, p. 31.

⁵ Ibid., p. 42-43.

⁶ Ibid., p. 22-23.

⁷ Ibid., p. 56-67.

⁸ Ibid., p. 47.

⁹ Ibid., p. 48.