Chicago Black Belt: Residential Patterns and Social Class

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The Seven Zones in the South Side Negro Community

Within the Negro community there are processes of selection which bring about segregation on the basis of occupations, intelligence, and ambition. The result of these processes of selection in the case of immigrant colonies and ghettos is that "the keener, the more energetic and more ambitious move into the area of the second immigrant settlement or into a cosmopolitan area in which the members of several immigrant and racial groups meet and live side by side." But as these processes take place in the Negro community, there is greater resistance offered to the movement of the Negro chiefly because of his color. Therefore, the majority of the population in 1920 was spread over a large continuous area on the South Side. The expansion, which has taken place since the World War, has continued to follow along the State Street arterial highway southward and to spread eastward until the Black Belt area at present is almost continuous with the Woodlawn area.

As the Negro community has expanded southward, through the process of selection, different elements in the Negro population have tended to become segregated in different zones within the community. Although nearly four-fifths of all the Negroes in Chicago were born in the South, the proportion of southern-born inhabitants in the population diminishes as one leaves those sections of the Negro community nearest the heart of the city. It is in those zones just outside of the Loop where decaying residences and tottering frame dwellings presage the inroads of industry and business that the southern migrant is able to pay the cheap rents that landlords are willing to accept until their property is demanded by the expanding business area. In these areas of deterioration the poorer migrant families are often forced into association with the vicious elements of the city. "We came from the South to Chicago in April 1913 and having no relatives here, we naturally drifted down to Twenty-third and Wabash," said a stenographer, whose family has moved southward with the expanding community and now lives in the fourth zone. She continued:

At that time we were living in the Red Light District. In this block at Twenty-third and Wabash were mixtures of white and colored people. The white people were all prostitutes. They ran buffets and beer flats. But it was not so among the colored people. They were decent people and attended Quinn Chapel. There

was a house next door to us operated by a white woman named Sophie. She had a house full of white girls and you could see the men coming in and out all day and night. They would come up the alley and in the back gate. In the day the girls would sit around in the yard half clad. They would wash their hair and sit out there to dry it. The big gate was kept locked during the day. The policemen would come up and ring the little bell and Sophie would come out and unlock the gate. They were just protecting the house, I suppose, and would go in to get a drink or get tipped off. At night the gate was not locked and men would come and go. At any time during the night people would knock at our gate thinking it was the place. There were a number of such houses in the neighborhood. We were never permitted to sit out back because there were so many obscene sights. There was a flat just below us and when we went on our back porch we could see girls coming up to the windows nude and when it was warm they would prop their feet up in the windows and smoke cigarettes. We never got into any trouble with these people. We wouldn’t speak to them and they didn’t speak to us.

As the migrant families have gradually become established in the city, they or their children have moved out of the areas included in the first and second zones (see Table 1) into the better neighborhoods. This southward movement of the Negro population has also been in response to the ever-expanding central business area. As these southern migrants, whose illiteracy in 1920 was the same as the Negroes in Houston and Dallas, Texas, and over three times as high as that of the entire Negro population in Chicago, have pressed on the families in the better areas, the latter have moved into the zones further south. In the seventh zone, at the southern end of the Negro community, were concentrated those families who had succeeded in the struggle of city life. Although less than two-thirds of the heads of families in this area were born in the South, the parents of many of the native-born Negroes had come from the South during earlier migrations.

The progressive decrease in the proportion of southern-born Negroes in these seven zones was paralleled by an increase in the proportion of mulattos in the population. The so-called Black Belt on the South Side did not exhibit the same degree of blackness in all sections. In the first and second zones near the Loop, where the plantation Negro from the South first settled, only one out of five Negro men and one out of four women; one met in 1920 showed some admixture of white blood. But in the third zone one out of three Negro men and two out of five women were likely to show mixed ancestry. The concentration of mulattos in this zone as contrasted with the adjacent areas north and south was part of the process of selection in the Negro community. Through the heart of this zone ran Thirty-fifth Street, the bright-light area of the Negro community. Here were found the “black and tan” cabarets, pleasure gardens, gambling places, night clubs, hotels, and houses of prostitution. It was the headquarters of the famous “police king” and the rendezvous of the “pretty” brown-skinned boys, many of whom were former bell hops, who “worked” white and colored girls in hotels and on the streets; here the mulatto queen of the underworld ran the biggest poker game on the South Side; here the “gambler de luxe” ruled until he was killed by a bow-beaten waiter. In this world the mulatto girl from the South who, even since she heard that she was “pretty enough to be an actress,” had visions of the stage, realized her dream in one of the cheap theaters. To this same congenial environment the mulatto boy from Oklahoma, who danced in the rôle of the son of an Indian woman, had found his way. To this area were attracted the Bohemian, the disorganized, and the vicious elements in the Negro world.

### Table 1: Characteristics of the Negro Population in Seven Zones of the South Side Negro Community, Chicago, Illinois, 1920

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heads of families: Southern born</th>
<th>Zone I</th>
<th>Zone II</th>
<th>Zone III</th>
<th>Zone IV</th>
<th>Zone V</th>
<th>Zone VI</th>
<th>Zone VII</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mulattos, fifteen years and over</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>77.0</td>
<td>74.7</td>
<td>73.8</td>
<td>72.6</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>65.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>49.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>45.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons illiterate: ten years and over</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*For one census tract only, including the area between Sixty-third and Sixty-seventh streets.*

Chart 1: Percent of Negro Heats of Families Born in Southern States; Percent of Males and Females 15 Years of Age and Over Classified as Mulattos; Percent of Persons 10 Years of Age and Over Illiterate for Unit Areas — Chicago, 1920
The segregation of mulattoes in even greater proportions in the sixth and seventh zones, where there were fewer southern-born Negroes and less than 3 per cent illiterate, was an aspect of the general tendency of the higher social and occupational classes to move out from the mass of the Negro population. This had been the case since the beginning of the Negro community in Chicago. The small group of Negroes, mostly mulattoes, who represented the vanguard of the race in thrift and attempts to acquire some degree of culture, had continually attempted to escape from the less energetic and the lower elements in the Negro population. "My father did not care to live with the colored people for he could not see how he could make any progress among them," said an old settler, whose father, once a trusted mulatto slave in Kentucky, had bought his family and come to Chicago just before the Civil War. He with his family moved out on the West Side and bought a home on Lake Street. The same was true at a later date of the small group of Negro families who first bought homes and settled in the Woodlawn area or the seventh zone in the South Side Negro community. Among this group were three Pullman porters, a government employee, and a police lieutenant. This community continued to grow during the present century, and in 1920 the large proportion of mulattoes — 50 per cent — in the Negro population coincided with the concentration of the upper occupational classes in this area.

The spatial pattern, which the seven zones in the South Side Negro community presented, was a reflection of the occupational and cultural organization of the community. Originally, the small group of Negroes who, because of superior culture, emerged from the mass of the population and constituted the upper class did not represent primarily the occupational differentiation of the population. The development of industrial and professional classes in Chicago as in other cities has been accelerated by the migrations. The migrations to southern cities had in previous decades brought about some differentiation of the population on the basis of occupation; but the migrations to northern cities during the war period offered the Negro unprecedented opportunities to gain a foothold in the industrial organization of these cities. Moreover, in the large Negro communities in the northern cities, the occupational differentiation of the population has been due partly to competition to serve the newly created wants and varied needs of an awakened people.

The occupational organization of the Negro community conforms to the distribution of Pullman porters, who at one time represented, on the whole, the group that had a comparably good income and a high conception of their place in the community. "Once in Chicago," said a former porter, "you weren't anybody unless you were a Pullman porter. We handled more money than most of the colored people, and led all the social life." The confirmation of this statement by a representative of the professional group, who said, "The Negro has gone a long way from the time when the Pullman porters were their leading men in Chicago," indicated at the same time the rise of higher occupational classes of considerable size and influence in the Negro community. There had always existed a few professional and business men scattered in the city, but the migrations during the war had, as one
physician put it, "helped colored lawyers, doctors, and every colored person in Chicago." He continued:

They have been our best patrons. Of course, a lot of them were not properly adjusted because they had been used to rural life. I do not believe that this office building would have been here today if it had not been for those Negroes who came from the South. In less than thirty-eight years we have increased from five to two hundred and fifty doctors. We are living in better homes, and have more teachers in the schools, and nearly every colored church has benefited.

The professional and commercial classes which have superseded the Pullman porters as leaders have tended to be segregated in the same areas as the latter. Little more than 1 per cent of the employed men in the zone near the Loop, where four-fifths of the residents were born in the South, were employed as railroad porters. On the other hand, about nine-tenths of the men and women in this area were employed in domestic service and as unskilled laborers. The next area showed about the same characteristics except that the percentage of skilled male workers almost doubled. The small professional and clerical groups in these zones were in some cases unmarried persons who lived in the same building in which they had offices, and small groups of upper-class families who, owning their homes, attempted to resist the surrounding decay. The character of these areas was also indicated by the fact that nearly 50 per cent of the women were employed.

In the third zone, or bright-light area, there was a marked decrease in the proportion of persons engaged in the lower occupations and a corresponding increase in professional and other higher occupational classes. Here, too, were found isolated neighborhoods of property owners — mostly professional and business men — who had succeeded in keeping their neighborhoods free from the influx of disorderly families. The conspicuous decrease in the proportion of women gainfully employed in this zone probably reflected the general character of this area.

The two succeeding zones in the Negro community did not present, on the whole, a very marked contrast to the third zone in regard to the concentration of large numbers of upper-class persons in these areas. On the western borders of these zones, as throughout the Negro community, the poorer migrant families were advancing along the railroad lines entering the city. In the eastern part of these areas, better-class families, who had sought to escape the coming deluge of poor, ignorant, and disorganized Negroes in the areas farther north, were soon overwhelmed by the same people from whom they had escaped. A nurse whose family had moved into this area said:

When we bought this place here, all our neighbors were white except two colored families who had owned their property for thirty-three years, and three other colored families who had owned their homes for a shorter period. Soon after we moved in, the neighborhood began to change rapidly. A poor group of migrant
families with large numbers of children moved in. Some of the colored property owners moved out. A white man bought one of their homes and rented it indiscriminately to colored people. A colored man who owned the building on the corner had sought only good colored tenants, but the white speculator who bought his house paid no attention to the class of colored people who rented the house.

The increase in the proportion of upper-class Negroes in the sixth zone, with a much smaller group of women employed, marked the southward progress of these classes. A professional man who, with a physician, a lawyer, and a musician, was one of the first colored families to move into a select neighborhood in the third zone and had been forced to move farther South said:

The neighborhood rapidly degenerated. Negroes passing by at all times of the night on their way to State, Dearborn, and Federal, where they lived, used the vilest language and engaged in fights. The neighborhood became so bad that I was forced to move. At any time during the night you would hear a shot and the worst kind of cursing. My wife had a young baby and could not stand the nervous strain. We moved out to 51st and Michigan Avenue. It was beautiful out there, the lawn well kept and everything inviting. But the same thing is happening out there. The same class of Negroes who ran us away from 37th Street are moving out there. They creep along slowly like a disease.¹³

The same story was told by the small group of upper-class Negroes segregated for a long while in the seventh zone in the Woodlawn area. Here, in 1920, where only 34.5 per cent of the women were employed, a third of the men and women were engaged in professional and public service and commercial pursuits. In this area on the periphery of the expanding Negro community was found the greatest concentration of the upper classes. The statement of a real estate dealer who moved into this area twenty-one years ago was substantially the same as that of a prospective resident, a professional woman, who was contemplating moving into this area after having moved repeatedly from the third, fourth, and fifth zones to escape undesirable neighbors. This old resident said:

I moved out here because it was sparsely settled at that time, and on account of my family. I thought it best to be out where it was not so congested and the air more pure. We formerly lived in the 54th block on Dearborn — most of the better class Negroes living in that vicinity — but our immediate neighbors were very undesirable, causing disturbances all hours of night. It became so annoying that I was more determined than ever to move farther out South.¹⁴

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¹¹ Ibid., p. 9.
¹² E. W. Burgess, Residential Segregation in American Cities, p. 112.
¹³ Dr. Burgess has shown that the process of urban expansion can be measured by the rates of change in poverty, home ownership, and other variable conditions for unit areas along the main thoroughfares radiating from the center of the city. (Ernest W. Burgess, "The