The City of Black Angels: Emergence of the Los Angeles Ghetto, 1890-1930

Author(s): Lawrence B. De Graaf

Source: *Pacific Historical Review*, Aug., 1970, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Aug., 1970), pp. 323-352

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.com/stable/3637655

The City of Black Angels: Emergence of the Los Angeles Ghetto, 1890–1930

LAWRENCE B. DE GRAAF

The author is a professor of history in California State College, Fullerton.

THE SPOTLIGHT of national attention on black ghettos during the past decade has led historians to study a field which had previously been largely the preserve of sociologists and economists. Several excellent studies of the formation of major areas of black urban concentration prior to the Great Depression have been written, and long-held interpretations of the causes and timing of ghetto development have been altered.[1] To date, however, no historian has produced a scholarly study of the origins of the community in Los Angeles which, by 1960, ranked sixth among all black urban populations in the United States. This neglect resulted partly from the fact that writers saw no substantial black population in the West prior to the 1940s and concluded that the presence of Negroes was largely a phenomenon of wartime migration. Thus Gunnar Myrdal dismissed the role of blacks in the development of the West by noting that in 1940 they constituted in all states west of the Mississippi, outside of the South, only 2.2 percent of the nation's Negro population.[2] He was typical in neglecting to observe that one-fourth of this percentage resided in one county, mostly in certain sections of one city, Los Angeles, which already ranked fourteenth among the nation's cities in Negro population. It had been the largest black community

[1] See especially Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem, The Making of a Ghetto* (New York, 1963); and Alan F. Spear, *Black Chicago* (Chicago, 1967).

[2] *An American Dilemma* (New York, 1944), 186. In his "South" he included Missouri. For a recent example of the same attitude, see Christopher Rand, *Los Angeles: The Ultimate City* (New York, 1967), 129.

in the state since 1900, when the director of the census recognized it as one of only two substantial Negro centers in the West.[3]

At what period in history this center of Negro population became a ghetto, and whether the Los Angeles black community was a ghetto in the same sense as cities in the Northeast and South are questions which require a careful definition of terms and criteria. For many years most scholars worked from the premise that there had not always been a necessary relationship between a ghetto, "an area which houses a people concerned with the perpetuation of a peculiar (and different) culture," and a slum, a neighborhood characterized by poverty and physical and social deterioration.[4] The concentration of Negroes into urban ghettos grew out of the Great Migration of 1915–1929. The subsequent deterioration of these ghettos into slums was largely the result of the confinement of blacks to areas and structures whose size and age precluded adequate housing for the growing population. In emphasizing the recency of the black slum-ghetto, many writers partially accepted the view of "old resident" Negroes that the post-1915 influx of southern migrants was a cause of deterioration. Robert Weaver wrote that, prior to 1915, "Negro housing . . . [in the North] did not differ from that of any other race." [5] Black belts, ethnic segregation, and rent discrimination were evident, but these did not confine all blacks to certain areas, nor to the poorest housing, nor did it dampen their belief that with higher income they could advance to better housing. But the "Great Migration," by changing "the size and general characteristics of the migrants," transformed the black ghetto from a section for poor blacks to an area of racial confinement tightened by such new devices as restrictive covenants.[6] By the 1930s several studies of black sections revealed that most housing—for poor and well-off alike—was old, lacked modern sanitation, had been neglected by white owners, and was often occupied by more persons or families than it had been de-

---

[3] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census Of the United States: 1940 Population,* Part 1 (Washington, 1943), 9; Florence Murray, ed., *The Negro Handbook, 1946–47* (New York, 1947), 8–10; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900,* Vol. I, *Population Special Reports, Supplementary Analysis and Derivative Tables* (Washington, 1907), 204.

[4] Robert C. Weaver, *The Negro Ghetto* (New York, 1948), 7.

[5] *Ibid.,* 14.

[6] *Ibid.,* 14–15, 17, 21–23, 25, 31.

signed to accommodate.[7] Such overcrowded and deteriorating housing after 1915 bred the high sickness and death rates, high crime rate and police-resident hostility, poor educational and recreational facilities, and general deterioration which have come to characterize the black ghetto.[8]

In the past decade scholars and public commissions have expanded this definition of ghetto and slum and challenged its recency in American history. To this school the ghetto is not only a restricted residential area but, even more, "an impressionistic phrase which summarizes the social, economic, and psychological positions of black people in the city, and also the tone of urban race relations." [9] The earlier distinction between a ghetto and a slum was replaced by a single phenomenon, the slum-ghetto, "an area within a city characterized by poverty and acute social disorganization and inhabited by members of a social or ethnic group under conditions of voluntary segregation." [10] Several historians have challenged the "old resident" theory by noting that involuntary residential segregation and widespread racial animosity antedated the "Great Migration" to northern cities. Alan Spear writes:

> By 1915, Negroes had become a special group in the social structure of prewar Chicago.... The systematic proscription they suffered in housing and jobs, the discrimination they often... experienced in public accommodations and even municipal services, the violence of which they were frequently victims, set them apart from the mainstream of Chicago life....[11]

More recently, Gilbert Osofsky has used this broader definition to project the origin of New York's ghetto—and by inference all north-

---

[7] See especially Charles S. Johnson, *Negro Housing, President's Conference on Home Building and Ownership* (Washington, 1932), VI, 5–6. The reports of this conference, like those of housing commissions of the Progressive era, and the multivolume *Housing Survey... Los Angeles,* made by the Housing Authority of Los Angeles and the WPA in 1939–1940, are classic examples of the structuralist definition of ghetto and slum. This approach presumes that widespread social malaise could be rectified by such reforms as sanitary engineering and stricter building codes.

[8] St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis* (New York, 1945), I, 201–202.

[9] Gilbert Osofsky, "The Enduring Ghetto," *Journal of American History,* LV (1968), 243.

[10] *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Washington, 1968), 6.

[11] *Black Chicago,* 49.

ern ghettos—back to colonial times. He states that, in spite of the size of the black population or the number of different residential areas, "by all the standard measurements of human troubles in the city, the ghetto has always been with us—it has tragically endured." [12]

Both these interpretations give insights to the development of a black ghetto in Los Angeles, but neither affords a complete answer. To ascertain when a ghetto developed, this historian will accept the distinction between a ghetto and a slum, for by 1930 Los Angeles did have a distinct physical ghetto with few opportunities for blacks to live outside its boundaries. But the predominance of single-family dwelling units within that area, in contrast to the appearances of most other ghettos, led most writers to conclude that the city had no extensive Negro slum.[13] Therefore, the broader definition, specifically measuring occupational opportunities, social discrimination, and racial hostility must be employed to determine whether and when this ghetto took on the characteristics of a slum. These criteria must be augmented by considering several novel features of the Los Angeles area. Its development as an urban industrial metropolis was overshadowed by a continuous suburban expansion which provided much of the economic opportunity, particularly in the form of real estate investment.[14] Los Angeles also contained several racial minorities who rivaled blacks in number. Therefore, low occupational status did not necessarily preclude the accumulation of wealth, and blacks were not unique in the degree of racial animosity and social

---

[12] Osofsky, "Enduring Ghetto," 255, 245. While using the older definition of "ghetto," Sam Bass Warner, Jr., and Colin B. Burke also emphasize the uniqueness of Negroes in having "an extended tradition of ghetto living." "Cultural Change and the Ghetto," *Journal of Contemporary History*, IV (1969), 175, 186.

[13] This illusion lasted as late as the Watts Riot of 1965. The impression that Los Angeles's black community was largely middle-class prior to the 1920s has been told to this author by most residents of the World War I era whom he has interviewed. The same belief is also found in the few contemporary works or memoirs on or by blacks in Los Angeles. The nearest work to a comprehensive study of the early black community is J. Max Bond, "The Negro in Los Angeles" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1936). Many of Bond's observations were summarized in the WPA Federal Writers' Project, "The Story of the Negro in Los Angeles County" (n.p., 1936). The only history of blacks in California in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is Delilah Beaseley, *Negro Trail Blazers of California* (Los Angeles, 1919). In addition to being largely genealogy and lacking in synthesis, this work deals primarily with Negroes in the San Francisco Bay area. The only Negro from the pre-World War II era to attempt a historical sketch of Los Angeles is Charlotta Bass, *Forty Years* (Los Angeles, 1960). This work is biased by the crusading attitude of the author and the ideological stereotypes she employs.

[14] This characteristic of Los Angeles is well developed by Robert M. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850–1930* (Cambridge, 1967), 2, 141–145.

restriction they suffered. Finally, since some of the earliest references to deterioration have come from old resident Negroes, the volume and characteristics of migration to Los Angeles will be examined to test the validity of that factor as a dynamic of ghetto formation. Only when all of these variables have been considered can the development of the Los Angeles ghetto be fully understood.

The origins of the black community in Los Angeles have been traced to the founding of the city in 1781. Of the 44 original settlers, 26 had some African ancestry.[15] However, they quickly lost their majority position. By 1790 the first census of Los Angeles revealed only 22 mulattoes out of a total population of 141; moreover, few blacks came to the city during the remainder of the Spanish and Mexican periods. Thus the identified Negro element virtually disappeared, although recent research has found traces of African ancestry in several prominent land owners and political figures.[16] The first three decades of American rule saw several families, especially those of Biddie Mason and Robert Owens, which would long be prominent in the black community, come to Los Angeles. But the number of Negroes increased from twelve in 1850 to only 102 in 1880, less than one percent of the total population. The modern black community began not with the founding party but with the land boom of 1887–1888 which increased the Negro population in the city to 1,258, or 2.5 percent of the total in 1890.[17]

Had Negroes continued to come to Los Angeles at such a rate, a ghetto in the sense of an area of ethnic concentration might have developed by 1900. This possibility was averted by the collapse of the land boom in 1888, resulting in severe unemployment which spread throughout the state in 1893. Negroes in rural areas appear to have

---

[15] John Weatherwax, *The Founders of Los Angeles* (Los Angeles, 1954), 19–20. Earlier general histories of the city tended to enumerate some mulattoes as Indians and often contained disparaging comments about the quality of the founding party. See Theodore Hittell, *History of California* (San Francisco, 1885), I, 434; James M. Guinn, *History of California and Extended History of Los Angeles* (Los Angeles, 1915), I, 76.

[16] Harry E. Brook, *The City and County of Los Angeles* (Los Angeles, 1899), 13; William Mason and James Anderson, "The Los Angeles Black Community, 1781–1940," in Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, *America's Black Heritage: History Division Bulletin No. 5* (Los Angeles, 1969), 42–43; Miriam Matthews, "The Negro in California from 1781–1910" (research report for Library School, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 1944), ix–x.

[17] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census of the United States: 1850,* Vol. I, *Population* (Washington, 1853), 969–970; *Negro Population, 1790–1915* (Washington, 1918), 95; *Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890,* Vol. I, *Population* (Washington, 1895), 451–452.

TABLE I—Distribution of Negroes in Los Angeles by Ward and Assembly District Ranked in Ascending Order, 1890–1930

Percent of Total Population Composed of Negroes					Percent of Negro Population Residing in Each District*				
1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930
1.02	0.66	1.04	0.23	0.03	4.1	3.7	**	**	0.07
1.63	1.03	1.22	0.37	0.04	4.7	4.0	5.9	**	0.1
1.65	1.10	1.69	0.45	0.05	4.8	4.6	7.6	0.8	0.1
1.87	1.22	1.74	0.63	0.06	5.8	5.5	7.6	0.9	0.2
2.06	1.59	1.88	0.95	0.12	7.0	8.7	8.6	2.6	0.2
2.15	2.15	2.08	0.97	0.18	11.1	9.6	16.0	4.0	0.3
2.27	2.15	3.18	1.03	0.41	14.2	12.3	18.5	5.3	0.7
3.04	2.39	7.13	1.23	0.48	16.8	15.7	35.5	5.6	1.2
5.79	5.65		1.67	0.82	31.5	35.9		5.9	1.5
			3.00	0.82				12.9	2.1
			6.63	0.93				21.5	2.2
			14.12	1.02				40.1	2.3
				1.35					2.8
				3.34					7.4
				3.91					9.0
				35.59					70.0

* Districts in 1890 and 1900 are wards; in 1910–1930 they are assembly districts with varying boundaries. The order of ranking shows no horizontal correlation between similar geographical areas or numbered wards or assembly districts.

** Population too small for valid statistical comparison.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population of the U.S. at Eleventh Census: 1890*, Vol. I, 451; *Twelfth Census of U.S: 1900*, Vol. I, Part 1, 609; *Thirteenth Census of U.S: 1910*, Vol. II, 609; *Fourteenth Census of U.S: 1920*, Vol. III, 125; *Fifteenth Census of U.S: Population*, Vol. III, Part 1, 287.

been particularly affected by the depression, and their population in California declined between 1890 and 1900. Los Angeles received much of the exodus from rural counties, and by 1900 it had surpassed San Francisco to become the largest black community in the state. But the increase was smaller than that of the previous decade, and in 1900 Negroes numbered only 2,131, barely two percent of the population.[18] Some writers have noted that during this decade Negroes developed their earliest residential concentration, particularly in rooming houses along First and Second streets, and that they established several businesses on nearby Weller Street. But these faint signs of a ghetto were overshadowed by the fact that they

[18] Guinn, *History of California*, I, 368; Grace H. Stimson, *Rise of the Labor Movement in Los Angeles* (Berkeley, 1955), 93; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900*, Vol. I, *Population* (Washington, 1901), 76, 78.

could and did live throughout the city and were much less concentrated in any one area in 1890 and 1900 than they would be after 1910.[19]

Evidence that the black community prior to 1900 constituted a ghetto is as difficult to obtain by the broader criteria as it is by the standard of migration and concentration. The employment conditions of blacks showed signs of discrimination and poverty. They were hard hit by unemployment and, in 1893, when unions ignored their appeal for jobs, they formed an Afro-American Protective Association to secure work and lands.[20] But unemployment was not unique to blacks, and the effects of the depression were lessened by several factors. The full impact of the panic was not felt in Los Angeles until 1897, and considerable construction went on through the decade. Many blacks held service jobs and the influx of whites created a market for more such jobs, especially a demand for servants. Labor unions increased their membership among white workers, but they seem to have confined their racial hostility to the Chinese.[21] Depression did not discourage several black physicians from coming to the city, nor did it prevent blacks from developing businesses. Some who owned real estate survived the collapse of the boom and increased their estates. In 1896 the heirs of Biddie Mason refused an offer of $200,000 for their property on Spring Street.[22] The decade also saw little racial animosity toward blacks. Such hostility had declined since the 1860s, when the city was a center of Confederate sympathy. By the 1880s Los Angeles had desegregated its schools and the state had passed a civil rights law. In an era when Chinese were being excluded from jobs and driven from cities, the small and relatively inconspicuous Negro population appears to have enjoyed a lessening of racial tension and a considerable degree of acceptance.[23] At the turn of the century, the Los Angeles black community showed few signs of its future history, except for being the focal point in the West for black settlement and the logical place for a ghetto, if any city developed one.

---

[19] Mason and Anderson, "Los Angeles Black Community," 44; Bond, "Negro in Los Angeles," 47.

[20] Stimson, *Rise of Labor Movement,* 133.

[21] *Ibid.,* 172, 174, 64, 66; Guinn, *History of California,* I, 369; *Los Angeles Express,* June 21, 1891.

[22] *Los Angeles Times,* Feb. 12, 1909; Matthews, "Negro in California," xxiii.

[23] Guinn, *History of California,* I, 384; Bond, "Negro in Los Angeles," 35; Bass, *Forty Years,* 13, 29. The last source gives major credit to pioneer Los Angeles Negro editor J. J. Neimore for the passage of the civil rights statute.

Between 1900 and 1920 the volume of Negro migration to the city increased sharply, causing the Negro population to multiply more than sevenfold. This movement has obvious similarities to the Great Migration to northern cities after 1915. Most migrants came from southern states. There were also a few efforts at the mass importation of Negroes. The Southern Pacific Railroad brought nearly 2,000 to the area in 1903 to break a strike of Mexican construction workers, and in the following year hundreds of Negroes in Texas organized a flight from racial oppression to the Pacific Coast where they believed "there is no antagonism against the race." [24] Over all, however, the movement of Negroes to Los Angeles was neither as voluminous nor as concentrated in any short time period as the Great Migration. Neither local employers, with the exception of the Southern Pacific in 1903, nor the Negro press solicited migrants; the main tribune, the *California Eagle,* said little about migration through the First World War.[25] When the growth of the Negro population is compared with overall trends, the movement becomes but a small part of a general migration to the area, not a distinctive racial phenomenon.

TABLE II—NEGRO AND TOTAL POPULATIONS OF LOS ANGELES, 1890–1930

	Total Population	Negro Population	Percent of Population Composed of Negroes
1890	50,395	1,258	2.50
1900	102,479	2,131	2.08
1910	319,198	7,599	2.38
1920	576,673	15,579	2.71
1930	1,238,048	38,898	3.14

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population of U.S. at Eleventh Census: 1890,* Vol. I, 451, 452; *Twelfth Census of U.S: 1900,* Vol. I, 120–121, 134; *Thirteenth Census of U.S: 1910,* Vol. II, 163; *Fourteenth Census of U.S: 1920,* Vol. II, 294; *Fifteenth Census of U.S. Population,* Vol. II, 69.

The attractions that brought most blacks to Los Angeles during this period were similar to those which lured whites. The major mo-

[24] *Portland New Age,* April 18, 1903; *San Francisco Examiner,* May 16, 1904. The final destination of the Texas migrants is not certain, but later that year an African society was organized in San Bernardino. It planned to establish in southern California colonies of blacks from the South. *San Francisco Chronicle,* Sept. 11, 1904.

[25] *California Eagle,* 1917–1919, *passim.*

tive was economic. Typical was the civil servant who attributed his decision to move from Georgia in 1904 to a series of contacts he had with persons who had been to California and found it was a place "to make more and easier money." [26] A second factor attracting some was the climate. Its warmth convinced several visitors that this was a region where "Negroes belonged." A lawyer who arrived in 1913 exhorted his family to "come and dwell in God's country." [27] The climate also offered the hope of relief from ailments which were particularly troublesome in damper weather, and there are indications that some blacks participated in the "health rush" to southern California at the turn of the century. A Negro sanitarium was erected in Duarte during the early 1900s, and newspapers carried several letters from blacks giving health as their reason for coming to California.[28]

In personal characteristics, migrants between 1900 and 1920 were neither markedly elite nor proletarian, but many were optimistic about their ability to make a better life for themselves in the West. The one significant change during this period appears to be in their origin, though this conclusion must be drawn from data on the state as a whole, not on Los Angeles. In 1900, thirty-seven percent of California's Negroes had come from the Pacific states, less than half were of southern birth, and the largest portion of these came from the South Atlantic states. While these proportions are obviously exaggerated for Los Angeles, which had few Negroes before 1887, they do suggest that many of its black residents at the turn of the century were a "select" group, compared to most southern Negroes, in that they were acculturated to California by birth or had shown willingness to adapt to non-southern and urban cultures by long migration. Less than ten percent had been born in the West South Central states of Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Arkansas, the section from which Negroes, with a minimum of money or cultural change, were most likely to come to California. In the succeeding two decades the origins of California Negroes changed considerably, and by 1920 less than 25 percent were born in the Pacific states, 58 percent came from the South, and 27 percent were from the West South Central

---

[26] Baxter Scruggs, *A Man in Our Community* (Gardena, 1937), 51–52.

[27] *Ibid.*, 58; interview with Hazel MacBeth, widow of early twentieth-century Negro attorney, Sept., 1966.

[28] *California Eagle*, Dec. 15, 1906; *Portland New Age*, Jan. 26, 1907.

states.[29] This shift in origins may be interpreted as indicating that between 1900 and 1920 an increasing percentage of the Negroes in Los Angeles retained crude southern mannerisms that may have elicited contempt and hostility from whites. This line of reasoning is not borne out, however, if occupational and educational status is measured by the jobs that Negroes held in Los Angeles. Migrants throughout this period were predominantly common laborers, janitors, porters, and domestic servants. Less than five percent of the males were in business or the professions. These jobs were not always an accurate reflection of educational or previous employment level, as many migrants who had worked as teachers or skilled laborers in other states accepted lower status jobs in Los Angeles out of necessity.[30] But such underemployment also appears quite constant between 1900 and 1920.

Documented observations from this period give a different impression of the caliber of migrants. Quite a few came to the state with money. Stories of parties leaving the South for California mention their taking with them up to several thousand dollars to invest in California lands, and one black pastor estimated in 1906 that his brethren had $600,000 "lying in the bank." [31] Above all, commentators refer to the enterprising nature of the black population and the ability of those who came with very modest means to acquire considerable wealth. A businessman who moved from San Francisco to Los Angeles in 1901 described his brethren in the latter city as "industrious, prosperous people who have an object in life." [32] Another source notes that, "while a great many have brought some money, the large majority have started with their strong, capable,

---

[29] Davis McEntire, *The Population of California* (San Francisco, 1946), 94. Research statistics on state-of-birth figures by city were not published until the census of 1930, and there seems to be no other source (including city directories) from which such data can be gleaned for racial groups. Earlier censuses contain such figures for the entire state, but they must be used with care, for Los Angeles had only twenty percent of the state's blacks in 1900 and less than fifty percent in 1920. Moreover, the state in which blacks were born is not necessarily the one in which they had their longest or most recent occupancy, and, therefore, it is a very speculative basis for analyzing the characteristics of migrants. Hence the conclusions on the relative "selectivity" of black migrants must be taken as suggestive insights rather than definitive statements.

[30] Beasley, *Negro Trail Blazers,* 245; *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910,* Vol. IV, *Population: Occupations* (Washington, 1914), 560–561; *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920,* Vol. IV, *Population: Occupations* (Washington, 1923), 1129–1132.

[31] *California Eagle,* Feb. 10, 1906; *Crisis* (June, 1913), 65.

[32] *Pacific Coast Appeal,* Dec. 21, 1901.

willing hands and a determination to succeed as their only capital." [33] This observation is supported by the testimony of two Tennessee migrants who arrived in the community destitute but by the end of the 1920s had managed to acquire eight houses.[34]

In reviewing the nature of the migration, it is difficult to conclude that the newcomers contributed to isolation or necessarily caused the development of ghettos. At no time does there appear to have been a sudden, rapid influx of blacks which would have produced white alarm or an invasion of white residential areas comparable to that of Harlem. There were no colonies of blacks formed within Los Angeles during the period; on the contrary, most migrants came as individuals or as families desirous of becoming a part of a general Los Angeles community. While the percentage of southern migrants rose during this period, in both cultural and economic characteristics the average black migrant was not so different from others in Los Angeles that he should have felt the need for confining himself to a ghetto or that he could only afford the poorest areas. In sum, it is difficult to see how either the volume or characteristics of these migrants could have produced a ghetto. Yet by 1920 most Los Angeles Negroes did live in a few restricted areas which amounted to a spatial ghetto and which had some of the social, economic, and psychological characteristics of a ghetto in the broader sense of the term.

Dispersal over several areas of the city remained characteristic of black residence in Los Angeles during the early years of the twentieth century. In addition to the commercial settlement which had grown along Weller, First, and Second streets, blacks resided in the northwest portion of the city, along West Temple Street, the northeast, in Boyle Heights, the Furlong tract in the southeast corner of the city, and the western area along Jefferson Boulevard between Normandie and Western, as well as on numerous streets south of First Street and Central Avenue.[35] In 1904 the editor of the local Negro monthly, *The Liberator,* emphasized an apparently prevalent attitude on the opportunity and wisdom of residential dispersal:

The Negroes of this city have prudently refused to segregate themselves

[33] *Los Angeles Times,* Feb. 12, 1909.
[34] Bond, "Negro in Los Angeles," 129.
[35] *Ibid.,* 48, 67–69; Mason and Anderson, "Los Angeles Black Community," 44.

into any locality, but have scattered and purchased homes in sections occupied by wealthy, cultured white people, thus not only securing the best fire, water and police protection, but also the more important benefits that accrue from refined and cultural surroundings.[36]

While blacks living in railroad house courts could hardly consider themselves in "refined and cultural surroundings," the general impression conveyed by this quotation has been substantiated by interviews with black residents of this period. It is also corroborated by the census statistics of 1910, which showed substantial black population in all sections of the city and a difference of less than seven hundred percent between the districts having the highest and lowest proportions of blacks.[37] This broad distribution might be attributed to characteristics of Los Angeles as an urban area, especially its smaller population in comparison to many eastern cities, the rapid growth and expansion of its housing, and the relatively small amount of old housing in one area. However, these factors did not prevent a much higher degree of segregation among Japanese and Chinese than among Negroes in 1910. Moreover, these factors would not change so significantly in the following decade that they alone could explain the great increase in the degree of residential segregation of blacks by 1920.[38]

The formation of a distinct black district may be traced to the beginning years of the twentieth century, when blacks expanded from their centers of the 1890s and whites sold their homes and abandoned the area. The areas of greatest expansion were the commercial district along Weller Street and the segregated railroad houses adjacent to the old Arcade Station at Fifth Street and Central Avenue. By 1906 Negroes had established an area of settlement between Fourth and Ninth streets, from Central Avenue west to Maple.[39] In 1910, the community expanded to the east when a Negro

---

[36] J. B. Loving in *The Liberator* (Jan.–Feb., 1904), quoted in Bass, *Forty Years,* 14.

[37] Bond, "Negro in Los Angeles," 47; interview with S. W. Greene, Jr., Pullman porter and public servant, Aug. 1966; interview with Rev. L. F. Catley, early resident of Watts, Aug. 1966; interview with Dr. James A. Somerville, dentist and founder of Los Angeles branch, NAACP, June 1967. See Table I for statistics on the percentage of Negroes in each Assembly District in 1910.

[38] For a summary and refutation of these factors as determinants of ghetto growth, see Warner and Burke, "Cultural Change and the Ghetto," 181–184. *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910,* Vol. II, *Population* (Washington, 1913), 185.

[39] *Report of the [Los Angeles] Housing Commission, February 20, 1906 to June 30, 1908* (n.p., n.d.), 16; Bond, "Negro in Los Angeles," 64–65; interview with Miriam Matthews, Los Angeles city librarian, Aug. 1966; interview with S. W. Greene, Jr.

preacher purchased several acres of undeveloped land at Third and Traction for a commercial and cultural center and Bob Owens built a hotel in the area. Within a few years, however, white businessmen purchased the land at a considerable profit to the blacks, who looked south for their next community center.[40]

The street along which black settlement subsequently advanced and which was to become the heart of the black community, Central Avenue, had a history which in some respects is reminiscent of Harlem. It was established around the turn of the century as a neighborhood of houses and small businesses, including a legitimate theater. Even before the displacement of the black community center described above, blacks had been moving into the northern end of Central Avenue, attracted in part by the comparatively low rents. The decision of a real estate dealer to open a hotel at Eleventh and Central seems to have triggered a large scale exodus of whites after 1912 and a corresponding movement of blacks steadily southward, displacing the Jewish residents, although in most cases not displacing their ownership of businesses on the street.[41]

White exodus and black concentration in the Central Avenue area continued and by 1920 most blacks were living in one physical ghetto stretching approximately thirty blocks down Central Avenue and several blocks east to the railroad tracks, or in a few detached islands, especially on West Jefferson, Temple Street, and just south of the city in Watts. Each of these communities was separated from the Central Avenue ghetto by blocks of solid white resistance.[42] This concentration was accentuated by the location of most black churches and businesses in the Central Avenue area, leading some persons who resided in other parts of the city to move to the ghetto for social contacts.[43] It must be noted that this "ghetto" was still quite mixed in its population. A survey of areas of immigrant and minority group concentration in 1919 found Mexicans and Italians living in and adjacent to Negroes in the area between Central Avenue and the Los

---

[40] Bond, "Negro in Los Angeles," 65.

[41] *Central Avenue News,* 1909–1911, *passim;* Works Progress Administration, "Summary Report of Skilled and White Collar Negro Survey, Los Angeles County, 1935–36" (Los Angeles, n.d.), 38; interview with Edgar Goff, Watts architect, Jan. 1968.

[42] Homer K. Watson, "A Study of the Causes of Delinquency Among Fifty Negro Boys Assigned to Special Schools in Los Angeles" (M. A. thesis, University of Southern California, 1923), 10–11; Bond, "Negro in Los Angeles," 76–77; *Los Angeles Times,* 1909–1929, *passim;* Bass, *Forty Years,* 8–9, 14–15.

[43] Interview with S. W. Greene, Jr.; interview with Rev. Catley.

Angeles River, while Negroes and Russian Jews shared the district immediately east of the river.[44] Nevertheless, the increase in the concentration and segregation of Negroes between 1910 and 1920 was striking. By the latter year, nearly seventy-five percent of their population resided in three of the city's twelve assembly districts, while in five others Negroes composed less than one percent of the population.[45] These figures also suggest that after 1910 the major dynamic governing the location of Negroes shifted from their real estate investments and white withdrawal to an increasing restriction of Negroes to certain areas and mounting resistance by Caucasians to their expansion.

Incidents of possible resistance to black settlement and legal efforts to exclude them accompanied their earliest efforts to enter previously all-white areas in any substantial numbers. During the early 1900s white residents on Central Avenue endeavored to restrict blacks at Seventh Street, and one of the first blacks to settle south of that street was threatened by a mob. A decade later one of the first blacks to settle on Eighteenth Street and Central had her house sacked by a white mob.[46] Despite such occasional efforts at intimidation, blacks continued to obtain houses along Central Avenue and in 1918 moved from their old westside community into the prestigious West Jefferson area east of Normandie Avenue.[47] But by 1916 whites were publicly expressing their resentment of black neighbors. One writer complained to the *Los Angeles Times* of "the insults that one has to take from a northern nigger, especially a woman, let alone the property depreciation in the community where they settle. . . ." [48] Such feelings were most frequently expressed in the growing adoption of race restrictive covenants on property deeds. Restrictive covenants had been placed on some lots in the nineteenth century and were widely used by the early 1900s. Technically, they provided an absolute restriction against sale, lease, or rental to any person other than a white with

---

[44] California Commission on Immigration and Housing, *Community Survey Made in Los Angeles* (San Francisco, 1919), 14–15.

[45] *Thirteenth Census,* Vol. II, *Population,* 185; *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920,* Vol. III, *Population* (Washington, 1922), 125.

[46] Bond, "Negro in Los Angeles," 66, 70; Mason and Anderson, "Los Angeles Black Community," 45.

[47] Bessie McClenahan, "The Changing Nature of an Urban Community" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1928), 57.

[48] Letter to editor, *Los Angeles Times,* Jan. 11, 1916.

penalties of loss of premises for violation.[49] By 1917, one black resident described his tract during World War I as "encircled by invisible walls of steel. The whites surrounded us and made it impossible for us to go beyond these walls." [50]

This statement expresses the growing racial tension of the First World War period, but it exaggerates the extent of enforced segregation prior to the 1920s. Forcible exclusion of blacks was confined to isolated acts, and there is no evidence of a sustained organized effort to confine blacks to certain neighborhoods. The effectiveness of race restrictive covenants varied according to the determination of whites to enforce them and the resourcefulness of blacks in finding means of circumventing them. The latter was quite evident. In several instances light-skinned blacks posing as whites penetrated all-white neighborhoods, and whites sold to other blacks in violation of their covenants rather than live with them. Negro real estate brokers also made a practice of checking titles to see when covenants expired and then purchasing a house on a white block where the deed restriction had lapsed.[51] Not all whites resented such expansion. In some older residential areas, they welcomed the arrival of blacks as a means of getting rid of homes which "were nothing to brag about [but] . . . were veritable Edens to some of the Negroes." [52] By the end of the World War I decade, however, the use of block protective association restrictions as well as individual deed covenants heralded a more rigid and efficient era of residential segregation.[53] This movement received a considerable boost from a reversal of legal rulings on restrictive covenants.

Prior to 1919, local courts had ruled that race restriction clauses in property deeds were either illegal or unenforceable by court action. In 1914 two blacks successfully sued a Los Angeles realty company for

---

[49] *Los Angeles Investment Company* v. *Gary,* 181 Cal. 680. The early appearance of such covenants in Los Angeles has sometimes been explained as an expression of anti-Oriental rather than anti-black attitudes. (Interview with Miriam Matthews.) However, the Chinese had thoroughly segregated themselves by the 1890s, and there was no sizeable Japanese population or extensive anti-Japanese feeling in Los Angeles until the early 1900s. Roger Daniels, *Politics of Prejudice* (Berkeley, 1962), 13. The motives for restricting areas of Los Angeles to Caucasians in the late nineteenth century need further research.

[50] Quoted in Bond, "Negro in Los Angeles," 69.

[51] *Ibid.,* 77.

[52] Quoted in *ibid.,* 77–78.

[53] *Ibid.,* 85.

refusing to sell them property on account of color.[54] Two years later, in *Title Guanantee and Trust Co.* v. *Garratt,* the municipal court ruled that a deed restriction "is not only contrary to the general policy of the law, and contrary to the express provisions of Section 711 of the Civil Court . . . but also is unenforceable in the courts under the State and Federal constitutions." An appeal court upheld the decision but rejected the broad conclusion that individual residential exclusion was *ipso facto* a violation of the fourteenth amendment.[55] The same reasoning was applied in lower courts to a similar suit by the Los Angeles Investment Company against Alfred Gary. However, upon appeal to the California Supreme Court in 1919, that body by a three to two decision distinguished between a restriction against alienation (for example, sale or lease) of property to non-Caucasians, which was in violation of the state civil code, and the restriction against use or occupancy, which is found valid under law.[56] This reversal provided a legal precedent for enforcement of restrictive covenants that would be followed and enlarged upon through the Second World War, with the result that residential exclusion and eviction became much more common and effective than it had been before 1920.[57]

Such a pattern of black migration, residential segregation, and racial hostility would logically be expected to result in substandard housing, excessive rents, and other characteristics of a slum in the developing spatial ghetto. This result would seem even more certain in such a rapidly growing metropolis as Los Angeles. The city housing commission reported in 1908 that wooden shacks and tents were being thrown up on lots in the heart of the city to create "a peculiar kind of slum" lacking adequate water and sanitation facilities.[58] While the city had few multi-story tenements, it had many congested house courts consisting of several rows of small, poorly ventilated units with common outdoor privies and water facilities, "as vicious as the tenement condition in Eastern cities." A city council ordinance aimed at compelling landlords and railroad companies to improve these courts was only partially successful, and many

---

[54] *Jones and Guatier* v. *Berlin Realty Company,* cited in *Crisis* (March, 1914), 220.

[55] *Los Angeles Times,* April 24, 1916, July 12, 1919.

[56] E. B. Ceruti to Walter White, April 25, 1925, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Library of Congress.

[57] H. Claude Hudson to J. W. Johnson, Dec. 15, 1927, *ibid.*

[58] *Report of Housing Commission, 1906–1908,* pp. 4, 6.

were still occupied in 1920.[59] The rents charged for such quarters were also analogous to conditions in eastern slums. Tiny lots for tents rented for $2.50 per month, and by 1910 a "mere shack of two or three rooms" cost from $10 to $15 per month. These rents led to doubling up and chronic congestion. Finally, studies agree that virtually all the tenants were "foreigners," persons other than native white Americans.[60] From such evidence as this, Robert M. Fogelson could easily conclude that Los Angeles's Negroes shared with the city's Mexicans, Japanese, and southeast Europeans the common plight of being "confined to rented quarters in the deteriorating downtown district and outlying industrial sections." [61]

While all these groups had poorer and more restricted residences than native whites, there were great differences between the proportion of their populations which lived in slum conditions and the relative quality of housing inhabited by the majority of each ethnic group. Until the 1920s, Negroes appear to have had one of the smallest representations of the "foreign" groups in slum areas. Mexicans had the worst housing of any group. The poorest of all minorities, they composed most of the inhabitants of tent and shack colonies and occupied many of the poorest house courts, often dubbed "cholo courts." Prior to World War I, Chinatown and European immigrant districts—especially those of Russians, Italians, Slavonians, and Austrians—were cited as congested and lacking in sanitary facilities.[62] Negroes were mentioned least of all minority groups. Some resided in the Southern Pacific house court on New High Street, "one of the largest and dirtiest courts," and some lived in shacks in the center of the city. They were also noted for being able to occupy new and improved house courts, while Mexicans were generally excluded.[63]

By the time of the First World War, blacks' housing conditions

---

[59] Dana W. Bartlett, *The Better City* (Los Angeles, 1907), 72; G. Bromley Oxnam, *The Mexican in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles, 1920), 6–7; Margaret Fuller, "The Mexican Housing Problem in Los Angeles," *Studies in Sociology*, V (Nov. 1, 1920), 3.

[60] *Report of the [Los Angeles] Housing Commission, June 30, 1909–June 30, 1910* (n.p., n.d.), 4, 6; *Fourth Report of the Los Angeles Housing Commission, July 1, 1910 to March 31, 1913* (n.p., n.d.), 23.

[61] *Fragmented Metropolis*, 200.

[62] *Report of Housing Commission, 1906–1908*, pp. 8, 28; Fuller, "Mexican Housing Problem," 2; W. H. Matthews, "House Courts of Los Angeles," *Survey* (July 15, 1913), 461, 465; *Los Angeles Citizen*, Aug. 15, 1913.

[63] *Report of Housing Commission, 1906–1908*, p. 10; *Fourth Report of Housing Commission*, 24, 25.

drew greater notice. A 1915 study found that 68 out of 1,192 families in house courts were black, a much higher ratio than the proportion of blacks to the population.[64] In 1918 an anonymous Negro wrote:

> there are two distinct Negro colonies.... In both of these quarters I found that the white people are making the mistake of leaving these Negro quarters with bad sanitation and insufficient street work. They are not helping the Negroes to make the most out of themselves.[65]

This picture of Negro neighborhoods was quickly disputed by the *California Eagle*. "I should like to know just where these Negro quarters, with bad sanitation and insufficient street work are, in this city," asked the editor. "In fact, the Negroes here are exceptionally well housed by comparison with other cities." [66] Studies in 1919 cite blacks as residents of one "foreign district" which had many violations of state housing laws and a small percentage of ownership, but neither these nor other studies mentioned their presence in the most deteriorated areas. They were also never mentioned in connection with such ramifications of slum life as high crime rates, family instability, juvenile delinquency, prostitution, and gambling, which were noted in Mexican, European, and Chinese districts.[67] Most significant is the near-unanimity among black visitors and residents in extolling the beauty and viability of their community and making no reference to signs of deterioration:

> They [Negroes of Los Angeles] are without doubt the most beautifully housed group of colored people in the United States. They are full of push and energy and are used to working together.... I saw the business establishments of the colored people. There was a splendid merchant tailor shop with a large stock of goods [,] ... a contractor who was putting up some of the best buildings in the city with colored workmen; physicians, lawyers and dentists with offices in first-class buildings and, above all, homes—beautiful homes.[68]

In their social relations and quest for employment, however, Los

---

[64] California Commission on Immigration and Housing, *Second Annual Report, January 2, 1916* (Sacramento, 1916), 278.

[65] "Why I Decided to Be a White Negro," *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, Dec. 15, 1918, p. 3.

[66] *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 21, 1918.

[67] California Commission on Immigration and Housing, *First Annual Report, January 2, 1915* (Sacramento, 1915), 227–228; *Community Survey, Los Angeles*, 21, 64–69.

[68] "Colored Californians," *Crisis* (Aug., 1913), 193.

Angeles blacks may have considered themselves living in a ghetto. Socially they suffered discrimination and faced barriers typical of their treatment throughout the nation in the early twentieth century. Many theaters and places of amusement refused to seat them with whites; others tried to discourage their attendance by charging them higher prices. Many restaurants outside the black area refused to serve them; some insisted they use rear entrances and eat on stools rather than sit at tables. Women were refused service at some clothing stores, most hotels were closed to them, and Pasadena segregated its public playgrounds in 1918.[69] Generally, social segregation before 1920 stopped short of legalizing Jim Crow. Some blacks filed successful suits against public accommodations discrimination, and there were no serious efforts to segregate public schools.[70] But the extent of white hostility to racial equality and interracial association was seen when jitney busses appeared in 1914 with a policy of refusing to serve Negroes. For four years they flourished, despite efforts of street car interests and local government to outlaw them as a public menace. Jitney owners openly appealed to voters to defeat regulation laws in order to keep a public transportation medium that served whites only. When the council did outlaw them, one black observer reported that whites threatened a "near riot" and caused some black families to flee their homes.[71]

Blacks were similarly restricted from the start of the century in the areas of employment that were open to them. They were disproportionately represented in service jobs. In 1910 and 1920 nearly one-third of the employed males worked as janitors, porters, waiters, or house servants. Los Angeles did not have as many industrial jobs as northeastern cities, and blacks were largely relegated to the position of laborer. They received some jobs as chauffeurs and draymen, but they were virtually excluded from positions as conductors,

---

[69] *Crisis* (Sept., 1912), 221; "Why I Decided to Be a White Negro," 3; "Colored Californians," 194; *Los Angeles Times,* Oct. 21, 1913; *California Eagle,* 34th Anniversary Edition, Sept., 1919.

[70] *Los Angeles Times,* May 15, 1918; "The Annual of the Los Angeles Branch of the NAACP, Year 1917," NAACP Papers.

[71] *California Eagle,* Feb. 6, 1917; *Los Angeles Times,* 1914–1919, *passim;* Bond, "Negro in Los Angeles," 69.

motormen, and other higher jobs in transportation.[72] The most significant restriction was their absence from retail trade and non-professional white collar jobs—the largest area of employment in the city. In 1910 there were 6,177 store salesmen, of whom 8 were black; in 1920 Los Angeles had 11,341 salesmen, 28 of whom were black.[73]

Los Angeles lagged behind many other United States cities in the jobs it offered to blacks, especially during the 1910–1920 period. In most other major cities, the percentage of Negro males and females holding industrial jobs sharply increased. In Los Angeles, however, the percentage of blacks holding industrial jobs declined during the decade, and their overall job status by 1920 was more similar to that of northern cities before the Great Migration than after World War I.[74] This occupational pattern was not the result of a lack of skill on the part of blacks; college graduates, teachers, preachers, and other professional men were found holding custodial jobs. It was rather the result of extensive competition from European and Mexican immigrants and discrimination on the part of management.[75]

Blacks were also largely restricted to the lower rungs of public service work, although they secured a disproportionate share of some of these jobs. In 1912 a Georgia migrant, L. G. Robinson, was given the position of head of the janitors' department of Los Angeles County, and by 1929 he had expanded the janitor's staff from 35 to 178, nearly all of them black.[76] Los Angeles was ahead of many cities in opening some public service positions to blacks. The first black police were hired before 1900, and 23 were on the force by 1920, some in advanced ranks. Several authorities agree that Los Angeles was the first major city to employ blacks in its fire department.[77] But efforts of black women to gain training and jobs as nurses in the County Hospital during World War I caused threats of resignation by white nurses and victory came only after a long legal bat-

---

[72] *Thirteenth Census,* Vol. IV, *Occupations,* 560–561; *Fourteenth Census,* Vol. IV, *Occupations,* 1129–1132.

[73] *Ibid.*

[74] Dean Dutcher, *The Negro in Modern Industrial Society* (Lancaster, Pa., 1930), 69, 72, 78–80.

[75] Scruggs, *A Man in our Community,* 87; WPA, "Negro in Los Angeles County," 50–51.

[76] Scruggs, *A Man in our Community,* 82.

[77] H. Claude Hudson to Chief James E. Davis, Los Angeles Police Dept., May 26, 1927, NAACP Papers; *Crisis* (Nov., 1917), 38, 40; *Fourteenth Census,* IV, *Occupations,* 1130.

tle. On several occasions, blacks complained that they were barred from civil service jobs or examinations.[78]

Such a catalogue of discrimination would today be diagnosed as part of a syndrome which results in chronic poverty, psychological debasement, and social deterioration.[79] However, one must be wary of presuming such developments in Los Angeles during the early twentieth century. Most blacks received low wages; even the prestigious Pullman porters complained in 1912 that they earned only $25 per month. In a survey of families of black delinquents done in 1919 it was found that they averaged only two-thirds of the United States government minimum family income—making theft of food a necessity.[80] However, neither unemployment nor poverty are common themes in the literature and observations of the black community prior to the Great Depression. The wage rates of even menial jobs were high by southern standards, a janitor's position returning three or four times what many Negroes made in farming.[81]

The most important ameliorating factor was the opportunity to buy land and houses at a low price either for personal use or for resale in the boom of urban expansion that prevailed through much of this period. As one historian has described the scene,

> subdivision after subdivision was thrown onto the market until it seemed as if there would be no land left for farming between the city and the sea or between the city and the mountains. Investment companies, building associations, homemakers, home builders, and corporations of various kinds, limited and unlimited, were organized to furnish lots and houses to the homeless and lotless.[82]

This "bungalow boom" was particularly noticeable in the Central Avenue area where most of the houses were four- or five-room "California cottages" which were advertised at prices ranging from $900 to $2500 and usually sold for $100 to $200 down with monthly payments of $20.[83]

Many blacks of modest means and occupation found these homes

---

[78] *Crisis* (Dec., 1913), 63; Bass, *Forty Years,* 42; Beasley, *Negro Trail Blazers,* 256, 272, 275; Beatrice Thompson to Mary W. Ovington, Oct. 18, 1918, NAACP Papers.

[79] The multifold ramifications of modern ghetto life are well treated in Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto* (New York, 1965), chaps. 3–5.

[80] *Crisis* (March, 1912), 186; Watson, "Causes of Delinquency," 40–42.

[81] Scruggs, *A Man in our Community,* 61.

[82] Guinn, *History of California,* I, 371.

[83] *Central Avenue News,* Dec. 30, 1910, Jan. 27, March 24, 1911.

within their reach. A female domestic wrote Booker T. Washington that after thirteen years she had already bought one lot. The chief custodian for the city of Los Angeles picked up several lots on the edge of the city which he subsequently sold for a profit of several thousand dollars and went on to raise $40,000 in an endeavor to organize a grocery store. A dining car porter, arriving in the early 1900s, bought several successive houses in various parts of the town with little financial difficulty.[84] This real estate boom and home ownership gave Los Angeles blacks reason for optimism and enterprise despite discriminations in other aspects of life. But, considering the black's low job status, they also held an ominous potential. For if real estate prices rose beyond the ability of laborers to purchase lots, or if the most profitable areas of purchase were closed to blacks—as would occur in the 1920s—then their low occupational status would contribute to the pattern of poverty and neighborhood deterioration already becoming evident in many northern ghettos.

If the story of the Los Angeles ghetto before 1920 is one of enterprise and economic opportunities prevailing over racial hostility, segregation, and discrimination, the record of the succeeding decade is in many ways the reverse. This change was partly rooted in the volume of migration to Los Angeles. The Negro community, like all of southern California, experienced growth of unprecedented magnitude during the 1920s. Its population increased from 15,579 to nearly 39,000, while the city as a whole grew from 576,000 to nearly one and a quarter million.[85] In their motives for migration, whites and blacks remained similar, but their opportunities for settlement varied greatly. While whites built miles of residential tracts along the coast and into rural lands adjacent to the city, blacks were barred from such expansion and had to absorb the influx in their existing community or in older residential areas on its periphery. The result was increased ethnic concentration, a deterioration of property values, and a less optimistic view of their community on the part of some blacks. While this deterioration had not become as dominant a feature as it was in many eastern cities, the 1920s did establish the

---

[84] Scruggs, *A Man in our Community*, 74; interview with S. W. Greene, Jr.; Gracie Hall to Booker T. Washington, March 18, 1914, Booker T. Washington Papers, Library of Congress.

[85] *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*, Vol. II, *Population* (Washington, 1933), 52, 69.

foundations for many of the problems of Los Angeles's black community which became so noticeable in the 1960s.

Blacks entering the city met a pattern of racial discrimination and restrictive employment opportunities that differed little from conditions in earlier decades. Discrimination in public accommodations was less frequently reported, but the popularity of the Ku Klux Klan in southern California and the segregation of municipal swimming pools by the Los Angeles City Playground Commission created greater fears and uncertainities among blacks than had been expressed in earlier decades.[86] Employment patterns continued to be little different from the first two decades with most women employed in domestic service, and service work and common labor being the leading areas of male employment. The growth of industries proved of little benefit, for they were mostly light industries employing skilled labor. A 1926 study by the Urban League revealed that most employers refused to hire blacks on the ground that they were unfit for such jobs or that whites would refuse to work with them.[87] These conditions were no more proscriptive during the 1920s than they had been before. The crucial change was the tighter residential segregation and its effects upon alternative economic and housing opportunities and thus upon the condition of the entire ghetto.

The tremendous volume of migrants entering southern California in the early 1920s on the heels of the World War I housing shortage and the postwar depression contributed a major problem for the white population alone. This problem was magnified by widespread real estate advertising which led most migrants to enter the state with visions of immediate home ownership. Often unable to

[86] *California Eagle,* June 9, 1933; Harry Carr, "The Color Tragedy," *Los Angeles Times,* Dec. 1, 1923; Beatrice Thompson to Robert W. Bagnall, Dec. 20, 1922, NAACP Papers; H. Claude Hudson to Robert W. Bagnall, Aug. 20, 1925, *ibid.* Playground segregation took the form of designating certain days for blacks and excluding them at all other times. It was contested in court by the local NAACP branch (*George Cushnie* v. *City of Los Angeles, et al.)* but lower courts ruled against the NAACP, and such was the climate of opinion in the state at the time that local officers recommended against an appeal lest the ruling "set a precedent for all forms of segregation throughout California." (Bert McDonald to Hudson, Jan. 12, 1927, NAACP Papers.) A subsequent contest (*Ethel Priolieu, et al.* v. *City of Los Angeles, et al.*) did lead to lower court victory for the NAACP in 1931, and Los Angeles abandoned its policy of segregation. In several neighboring cities, however, it continued through the 1930s. *Opportunity* (April, 1931), 121; *California Eagle,* July 27, Sept. 14, 1939.

[87] Charles S. Johnson, "Negro Workers in Los Angeles Industries," *Opportunity* (Aug., 1928), 236–238; *Fifteenth Census, Population,* IV, 200–202.

obtain funds, many of them rented lots and erected tenthouses and shacks which "passed from one settler to another, constantly deteriorating, and [were] constructed without the minimum regard for sanitary necessities." [88] Black realtors advertised Los Angeles as having a higher percentage of black home owners than any other city, fully intending that such claims would "broadcast to colored Americans everywhere the opportunities, the welcome, the hope and cheer which free California, its hills and valleys . . . and always sunshine offer to the American Negro." [89] Los Angeles in the 1920s had all the ingredients for both an expansion of its black community into adjacent white areas and determined resistance to such penetration.

During the first years of the decade, blacks were able to expand into several previously white areas. Older residents in the Central Avenue community moved southward, displacing over half of the white residents and leaving their old houses to the new arrivals. By 1925 the main black community stretched down to the Florence district on Slauson Avenue. Here, expansion was checked. Families moving south of that street were driven out with threats of violence and in some cases had their homes raided and wrecked. In contrast to the short-lived efforts at exclusion along Central Avenue in earlier decades, this intimidation, attributed by some to the Ku Klux Klan, maintained Slauson as a racial boundary until the Second World War.[90] The small middle-class westside area expanded northward from West Jefferson to West Adams in 1923–1924, aided by many whites who had allowed their deed restrictions, initially put on in the 1880s, to expire. After a few persons had penetrated the area, a black realtor used block-busting by moving in an "undesirable" family and spreading the rumor that more would follow.[91] Blacks and Japanese also continued to move eastward in the vicinity of Jefferson Boulevard, where some whites broke their restrictive

[88] California Commission on Immigration and Housing, *Report on Housing Shortage* (Sacramento, 1923), 9, 13.

[89] Sidney P. Doanes, president of California Realty Board, quoted in *California Eagle*, Dec. 26, 1924.

[90] James Ervin, "Participation of the Negro in Los Angeles" (M.A. thesis, University of Southern California, 1931), 73–74; Bond, "Negro in Los Angeles," 101; *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 10, 11, 1925; *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Population and Housing, Statistics for Census Tracts, Los Angeles-Long Beach, California* (Washington, 1942), 161–162.

[91] Bond, "Negro in Los Angeles," 89–90, 137–138, 103, 99.

housing agreement in order to sell their property. Both of these "invasions" roused widespread fears of property depreciation which led to efforts to bind all white property owners in the area to a district-wide ban against non-whites. While not fully effective, it limited the area of black housing and so inflated prices—up to double what whites were charged—that this community was available only to the wealthiest class of blacks.[92]

South of Los Angeles lay a community whose name was a subject of derision in the early 1900s and of controversy in the 1960s—Watts. Some blacks had settled there in the late nineteenth century and established a southern agricultural community, but the town was predominately composed of white workers.[93] The low rents and status of its citizens made the name a "sort of clowning synonym in showdom for everything that is pedantic, plodding or punk," but by 1910 it was incorporated and regarded as a prosperous and attractive suburb.[94] During World War I southern Negroes began moving in, attracted by the low housing costs. Whites generally refused to buy near them, with the result that by 1924 the town was regarded as likely to have a black mayor. This "Watts invasion" was cited by other suburban papers as illustrating the folly of allowing any blacks to gain title to the land.[95] In 1926, allegedly at the instigation of the Ku Klux Klan, an election was held in which a majority of the voters chose annexation to Los Angeles rather than remaining a separate city which might be predominantly composed of blacks. The "lesson" of the Watts invasion apparently was heeded, for until World War II the blacks in Watts constituted a lonely island in an otherwise white southeast Los Angeles.[96]

By 1926, the substantial expansion of blacks into adjacent neighborhoods of central Los Angeles had ended; their communities were surrounded by established white areas closed by restrictive covenants.

---

[92] McClenahan, "Changing Nature," 74, 105, 199, 211–213.

[93] Arna Bontemps, *God Sends Sunday* (New York, 1931), 116–119; interview with Jimmie Brown, head of Willowbrook Job Corporation, Aug., 1966.

[94] *San Francisco Call,* April 18, 1909; Guinn, *History of California,* II, 446.

[95] WPA, "Negro in Los Angeles County," 46–47; Bond, "Negro in Los Angeles," 87–88; *San Pedro Daily Pilot,* n.d., reprinted in *California Eagle,* May 9, 1924.

[96] *Sixteenth Census, Statistics for Census Tracts,* 161–162; Robert Conot, *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness* (New York, 1967), 203. Another source attributes the annexation of Watts to the residents' dissatisfaction with chronic local political warfare and never mentions the issue of black rule. Richard Bigger and James Kitchen, *How the Cities Grew* (Los Angeles, 1952), 183.

New housing and long-range opportunities for residential expansion and race enterprise necessitated that they join the housing boom in suburban areas. In retrospect, perhaps the most significant turning point in the development of the Los Angeles ghetto was the several efforts blacks made during the 1920s to join the urbanization of outlying areas and their complete rebuff in all these endeavors.

The most publicized attempts at suburban expansion were several recreational centers, mostly in beach areas, which generally had the dual aim of providing a "more cultured and sophisticated recreation" and of being nuclei for black residential colonies. In 1925 an attorney established the Pacific Beach Club at Huntington Beach, Orange County, after a long battle with the local chamber of commerce over access routes. When the buildings were almost finished they "caught fire and were totally destroyed." A nationwide appeal by the club for renewal funding only spurred greater local white opposition, and by the end of the year a white club took over the property.[97] In 1922 rumors of a black bathhouse and amusement center at Santa Monica led the city commission to pass ordinances prohibiting their construction and closing a black dance hall. Property owners along the beach were urged to adopt covenants to prevent Negro purchase or occupancy. A white country club in Corona, between Riverside and Los Angeles, was taken over by blacks in 1928 as an inter-racial recreation area, but it failed for lack of patronage.[98] Equally hostile attitudes in other suburban areas were illustrated by Lomita, south of Watts, where signs were posted telling Negroes to stay out, Glendale's advertising the absence of blacks from its schools, and the long battle that Booker T. Washington, Jr., had in retaining a home he had bought in the San Gabriel Valley.[99] The epitome of suburban exclusion came in Manhattan Beach, where a combination of Ku Klux Klan pressure and white and black real estate ventures to open tracts to Negroes led the city to condemn property owned by blacks since 1911 and close the beach to their swimming as well as occupancy. An NAACP suit re-opened

---

[97] *Los Angeles Times,* April 2, Sept. 8, 1925, Nov. 6, Dec. 19, 1926.

[98] F. B. Washington, "Recreational Facilities for Negroes," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* CXL (Nov., 1928), 279–280; *Los Angeles Times,* April 21, 1928, July 30, 1922.

[99] *California Eagle,* June 3, 1922; *Western Appeal,* Jan. 21, 1927; *Los Angeles Times,* Feb. 16, 1926, April 21, 1928.

the beach to bathers, but by the end of the twenties virtually all black residents had been terriorized out of the city.[100]

Residential segregation and exclusion efforts owed their success in part to support by the courts. The most celebrated case came in 1925 when white property owners brought suit against the Long family for purchase of a converted house in the south Central Avenue area. The suit was an ominous one, for while the entire tract was covered by covenants, Negroes had lived there for as long as seventeen years. NAACP attorneys contended that this change in racial conditions invalidated the covenants, since to rule otherwise would pave the way for wholesale forfeiture. But the lower court ruled against Long and, when NAACP attorneys failed to file an appeal, suits were filed against all other blacks in the area.[101] The effectiveness of restrictive covenants was further enhanced in 1928 when the California Supreme Court upheld neighborhood restrictive agreements even when Negroes had occupied the area and ruled that the black families must vacate restricted properties in West Los Angeles.[102]

By 1930 the effect of such court decisions, restrictive covenants, and exclusion from outlying areas was to contain nearly all Negroes in Los Angeles in several isolated communities whose populations were becoming predominantly Negro. Out of fourteen assembly districts, one (the 62nd), running along Central Avenue, had seventy percent of the city's Negroes. In five districts, Negroes were virtually absent. So rigid had the segregation become that the ghetto grew little during the 1930s, even though more blacks came to Los Angeles than in any previous decade.[103] The effects of such congestion on the quality of neighborhoods was accentuated by the lack of new home-building—nearly all houses in the ghetto had been built before World War I—and the rezoning of the northern section of Central Avenue for manufacturing in 1922. Over a hundred industries were located there by 1939, and many owners lost interest in maintaining residential structures. By 1929 many of the older areas along Central

---

[100] Bass, *Forty Years*, 56; *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 1926, Feb. 17, 1928.

[101] Bond, "Negro in Los Angeles," 86–87; Eunice Long to NAACP National Office, Nov. 3, 1927; H. Claude Hudson to Robert W. Bagnall, Dec. 17, 1926; Hudson to J. W. Johnson, Dec. 15, 1927, all in NAACP Papers.

[102] *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 23, 1928.

[103] *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*, Vol. III, *Population*, Part I (Washington, 1932), 287; *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940*, Vol. II, *Population*, Part I (Washington, 1943), 517.

Avenue had the structural characteristics of a slum—few sanitary conveniences, leaky pipes and roofs, patched windows and doors, and a general lack of house repair and good maintenance.[104]

Widespread residential exclusion, employment discrimination, social segregation, and growing congestion and structural deterioration of housing were reflections of a pervasive racial animosity toward blacks. They tempt the historian to classify parts of Los Angeles by 1930 as a slum-ghetto in league with most northern cities. This evaluation gains support from some contemporary observers. The comments about the black community by its residents and visitors were less optimistic and had fewer references to the beauty of the area than the observations of earlier decades. Instead, residents spoke of the decline of neighborhoods, the rise of prostitution and crime, and the advertising of Central Avenue's night clubs as "ones which would make Monte Carlo or Sodom look like a Sunday School picnic." [105] But the causes of this deterioration were attributed not to white hostility but to the influx of a "lower class" of southern migrants whose attitudes of superstition and irresponsibility contrasted with the older residents' ethic of work and self-improvement.[106] A growing proportion of blacks in both the state and the city of Los Angeles were of southern origin, and the majority of these came from the West South Central states. Texas was the birthplace of one-fourth of the city's blacks by 1930.[107] But any inference of "low caliber" which may be drawn from the shifting origin of migrants is rebutted by evidence that "color" alone heightened racial restrictions during the 1920s.

The condition of European immigrants is one case in point. They were singled out as late as 1919 for living in slums and being in danger of developing "ghettos" if their housing was not improved. During the 1920s they vanished as a subject of concern. The "foreign districts" of the state cited as slum areas in 1923 were "southtown," "Mexican village," and "Chinatown," racial rather than immigrant ghettos. In 1930 foreign-born whites had the highest percentage of

---

[104] WPA, "Negro in Los Angeles County," 49; *Housing Survey Covering Portions of the City of Los Angeles, California, Conducted [by] Los Angeles City Housing Authority* (Los Angeles, 1940), I, 84.

[105] *Flash* (March 30, 1929), 4; Bond, "Negro in Los Angeles," 146.

[106] Bond, "Negro in Los Angeles," 124–125.

[107] McEntire, *Population of California*, 94; *Fifteenth Census. Population*, II, 219–221.

home ownership in Los Angeles of any segment of the population.[108] They had long enjoyed greater access to skilled industrial and white collar jobs than blacks, and native white hostility to their residence gradually diminished, especially where blacks or Japanese also entered the neighborhood.[109] Their record of emergence from ghettos in an atmosphere of diminishing discrimination is an interesting contrast to the black experience. The "old resident" theory was similarly rebutted by events in the West Jefferson area where generally well-educated and well-to-do blacks, whom the white residents recognized as "a good class of colored people," met widespread fears of property depreciation and organized efforts to prohibit whites from allowing them entrance to the area. An ominous sign of growing animosity toward Negroes was the remark of some residents that they preferred Japanese to black neighbors.[110]

While dismissing the old resident theory of the causes of deterioration, the historian must also modify the analogy between Los Angeles and eastern ghettos of the 1920s. The Los Angeles ghetto still retained many opportunities for black migrants, chief of which was the promise of owning a home. In 1930 over one-third of the black families owned their homes, in contrast to 10.5 percent in Chicago, 15 percent in Detroit, and 5.6 percent in New York. Only six cities of 100,000 or more exceeded Los Angeles in black home ownership, and none of these had as large a black population. There was also an exceptional degree of equality between whites and blacks in their degree of home ownership. In 1930 Los Angeles had ten blacks per black-owned home as opposed to eight whites per white-owned home. Most other cities had ratios in excess of 2:1. In New York the ratio was 77:15; Chicago, 44:12; and Detroit, 31:10.[111] Blacks were relegated to old and often deteriorating structures, but they did not have the extensive dependence on white landlords nor the excessive rents which plagued many other ghettos, or Mexicans in Los Angeles.[112] Home ownership also provided a base for continuing pride

[108] *Community Survey, Los Angeles,* 64–69; California Commission on Immigration and Housing, *Ninth Annual Report, January 9, 1923* (Sacramento, 1923), 64–65; *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930,* Vol. VI, *Population, Families* (Washington, 1933), 156.

[109] *Thirteenth Census,* Vol. IV, *Population,* 560–561; *Fourteenth Census,* Vol. IV, *Population,* 1129–1132; McClenahan, "Changing Nature," *passim.*

[110] McClenahan, "Changing Nature," 210–213, 217, 197.

[111] U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Negroes in the United States, 1920–32* (Washington, 1935), 277–279.

[112] California Commission on Immigration and Housing, *Report on Housing Shortage,* 13.

in the black community. Several important businesses and prominent buildings were established, culminated by the Hotel Somerville which was built in 1928 to host the NAACP convention. Throughout the decade the Ceneral Avenue district had a black assemblyman, Frederick Roberts.[113]

By 1930 the dynamics of the ghetto formation—in all senses of the word—were well established, and symptoms of deterioration and an emerging slum-ghetto were evident. But it would take another decade of residential segregation, a major depression, and then a massive in-migration of blacks to culminate the development of the Los Angeles ghetto.

---

[113] Bond, "Negro in Los Angeles," 125.