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FLORIDA AND THE BLACK MIGRATION

by JERRELL H. SHOFNER *

WHEN THE EUROPEAN WAR ERUPTED IN 1914 the flow of immigrants to the United States was greatly curtailed, depriving developing American industries of their traditional supply of new laborers. Northern railroad and manufacturing firms then turned to the native blacks of the South as potential workers to fill the unskilled jobs so necessary to their continued growth. Southern blacks had been migrating northward in small numbers since before the turn of the century, but when northern companies began sending recruiters into the South the numbers accelerated enormously. Beginning with the Pennsylvania Railroad's recruiting of several hundred blacks from Jacksonville, Florida, in early 1916, the "great migration" took more than a half million Negroes out of the South to northern industrial cities. They came from the southern rural regions where there had always been a large labor surplus. Now the massive exodus began to alarm turpentine, lumber, and agricultural producers, and caused glaring contradictions in the attitudes of white Southerners toward their black neighbors.

Between early 1916 and 1920 about 40,000 blacks left the northern Florida counties.¹ Some migrated to Miami and other south Florida locations, but most left for New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and other northern states. Migration studies show that the largest proportional movements of blacks from the entire South occurred from west Florida, Tampa, and Jacksonville. Because of its location as a transportation center, Jacksonville became the major focus of the movement. With a Negro population of 35,000, the city lost more than 6,000 of them. About 14,000 more assembled there from adjacent rural

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1. United States Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Abstract, Florida* (Washington, 1913), 590-99; Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States 1920, Population, Florida* (Washington, 1922), 192-94.

areas for transportation out of the state. Tampa was also an important assembly point from which nearly 5,000 blacks migrated. Others went directly from their rural homes. From tiny Capitola just east of Tallahassee, most of the black residents left for Jacksonville and other Florida locations as well as northern cities. A sizable group of Leon County blacks went to Connecticut to work in the tobacco fields. It was estimated that the areas adjacent to Apalachicola, Gainesville, and Ocala lost about twenty to twenty-five per cent of their blacks. About half the blacks of Palatka and DeLand left, while Orlando and Lakeland lost approximately a fourth of their black populations. In a few cases, entire communities, including pastors of local churches, left as groups for northern points. Live Oak and Dunnellon, among others, were starting places for such movements. By late summer 1916 so many blacks had left northern Florida that it was claimed that "the more stable classes of negroes became unsettled."²

There were good reasons for Negroes to move, especially from northern Florida. The arrival of the boll weevil had added to the heavy burden of the crop lien system. Tenancy as an agricultural system was no longer able to support that part of the population which had depended on it. The turpentine camps and timber operations required laborers to work under adverse conditions for inadequate wages. When the Pennsylvania, Erie, and New York Central railroads, the iron and steel manufacturers, and others sent recruiting agents into the South offering six or seven dollars a day in wages to people who were working for a dollar or less, they found many blacks willing to leave.

There were other reasons also. All of the state legislatures of the South and most southern communities had enacted an extensive list of Jim Crow laws requiring complete separation of the races except where blacks were subservient to whites. These legal sanctions were accompanied by increasing violence against blacks. Beatings, petty abuse, and insults were commonplace, lynchings were all too frequent, and harassment by law enforcement officials, especially in the towns and cities, was extensive.

The Pennsylvania Railroad began recruiting blacks in Jacksonville in early 1916. The New York Central hired 500 men out

2. Emmett J. Scott, *Negro Migration During the War* (New York, 1969), 62-63.

of the city about June of that year and a total of 1,500 during the next several months. The *Indianapolis Freeman* reported that over 10,000 Floridians had departed the state for northern points between September and November that year.³ Jacksonville was a major lumber and naval stores center and the home of the influential Georgia-Florida Sawmill Association whose members employed thousands of blacks. Over the years the city's white business and political leaders had maintained fairly good relations with their black counterparts. Now they realized the need to deal with the black exodus. First to act were Mayor John E. T. Bowden, John Ball, F. C. Groover, P. L. Sutherland, and Arthur G. Cummer of the Chamber of Commerce. They met with members of the Negro Board of Trade-L. H. Myers, M. Baker, Jr., J. W. Floyd, N. W. Collier, G. W. Wetmore, George A. Sheehy, Joseph E. Lee, and J. H. Ballou-and urged them to assist in discouraging migration. The black leaders generally agreed to help. Sheehy doubted the wisdom of going north; Ballou thought Negroes would fare better in the South and promised to say so to laborers whenever possible. Lee and Collier also agreed with this view.⁴ About a week later the Negro Board of Trade members issued "Words of Advice to all Negroes of Duval County." Having considered the problem at two meetings, they admitted that while local blacks were being treated to "disproportionate use of tax money and some abuse by petty officers, also inadequate wages from some firms . . . these wrongs cannot be corrected by running away." While the group condemned the "wholesale exodus as injurious and unwise," their reasoning may not have convinced laboring blacks. If the exodus continued, they asked, "who will support the negro men of business and those in professions."⁵

That some blacks were unconvinced was soon apparent. Within a week after "Words of Advice" was issued eleven union leaders representing black stevedores, plasterers, carpenters, painters, and bricklayers denounced the statement as unrepresentative of Negro laborers in Jacksonville. When James Weldon Johnson, editor of the *New York Age* and a Jacksonville native,

3. *Indianapolis Freeman*, November 4, 1916; George E. Haynes, *Trend of the Races* (New York, 1922), 28.

4. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, July 27, 1916.

5. *Ibid.*, August 6, 1916.

was asked whether he thought blacks stood to benefit "financially, morally and religiously," as well as in "manhood, citizenship, etc." by migrating northward, he indicated his approval. Migration was good for all, Johnson felt, and if the South desired to keep the blacks it should provide fair treatment and impartial execution of the laws. A few days later, he reprinted an article from a Jacksonville newspaper depicting the city's new railroad station whose "West Bay (Street) end will be occupied by the Negro waiting room, smoking room and the Negro women's room. It will have a separate entrance so that Negroes may go and come without coming into contact with white persons."⁶ The arguments of Johnson and the labor leaders were enhanced in July when workers struck the Seaboard Airline Railroad shops. Deputy sheriffs patrolled the area, while replacements were hired in place of the strikers.⁷

And the city council used more than moral suasion. It enacted an ordinance requiring that all labor recruiting agents must pay a \$1,000 license fee. Failure to do so would be penalized by a \$600 fine and sixty days in jail.⁸ At the same time northern railroad firms were asked to stop their recruiting efforts in the state. R. L. Sutherland reported that while telegrams had been received from the heads of several companies promising that their agents would be withdrawn, he was concerned that "free lance" agents would continue to cause turmoil. City Judge W. W. Anderson found Frederick Ruff and R. N. Mullen innocent of violating the ordinance by recruiting laborers to be sent out of the state. He ruled that the license was required only of "free lance" recruiters; Ruff and Mullen were employed by a company which planned to hire the new workers. But the judge changed his mind a few days later when 500 blacks were left stranded at the city's Union Depot when E. G. Chase, Hugh Powell, and B. F. Jefferson were arrested for recruiting without licenses. Jefferson and Chase were found innocent, but Powell was convicted and fined \$200. Blacks attempting to board trains for whatever reason were subjected to harassment by local police during the follow-

6. *Ibid.*, August 14, 1916; *New York Age*, August 24, 1916; Eugene Levy, *James Weldon Johnson: Black Leader, Black Voice* (Chicago, 1973), 192.

7. *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, July 27, 1916.

8. Scott, *Negro Migration During the War*, 37; *New York Age*, August 24, 1916.

ing weeks, but recruiting agents remained active. Several clashes between the local police and recruiting agents occurred, but there were few convictions until December 1916, when B. F. Shannon, an attorney, Andrew J. Butler, a minister, and Henry Bryant were arrested "on charges of being suspicious characters and recruiting labor without a license." They were convicted and fined \$250 each.⁹

The situation was still unsettled when Sidney J. Catts was inaugurated as governor on January 2, 1917. He first became interested in the migration controversy when white turpentine and lumber operators complained that their laborers were being enticed away from the north Florida forests by promises of better wages and working conditions in the North. But it was apparently Robert Randolph Robinson, a longtime black leader, Republican politician, and former deputy United States marshal, who convinced the governor that action was required. Agreeing with the Negro Board of Trade in its opposition to migration, Robinson organized the National Colored Protective Association to stop the tide of black migration out of the state.¹⁰ According to Robinson, blacks preferred to remain in the South, but they also needed equal justice before the law, cessation of the "rough treatment colored people have been receiving at the hands of public officers," and increased wages to offset the recent rise in the cost of living. He would seek these remedies through conferences between employers and governing officials rather than by strikes.

Catts responded favorably to Robinson's request that he address Jacksonville's black community on the matter. In late June 1917, the governor spoke at Ebenezer Methodist Episcopal Church in Jacksonville on "Protection, How to Get It, How to Keep It, and the Attitude of the Administration toward the Negro Race." He advised the blacks to remain in the South and promised that he would show them fair treatment. Robinson declared that the governor's address was so successful in slowing

9. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, July 29, August 4, December 15, 17, 1916.

10. Hugh E. Miller to E. C. Weeks, January 18, 1893, Weeks Family Papers, M74-22, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee; R. R. Robinson, "Don't You Want to Check Colored Laborers Leaving the South for the North?" Chief Clerk's Files, Records of the Department of Labor, Record Group 174, National Archives, Washington.

the tide of migration that \$10,000 had been redeposited with Anderson, Tucker and Company, a local Negro bank, by people who had withdrawn their money in preparation for departure.¹¹

To bring together the laborers and the "larger interests using labor," Robinson obtained Catts's agreement to speak at the Negro Masonic Temple in Jacksonville on September 14. A large crowd of blacks assembled there along with several white business and industrial leaders. There were several speakers, but Catts was the star attraction. In introducing the governor, Robinson explained the purpose of the National Colored Protective Association of Florida and suggested that committees composed of "leading white men" and an equal number of "sensible negroes" be organized in every Florida county to settle all disputes where blacks were involved. Such a policy, he declared, would "clear the jails and negro labor for the white man would be protected and the old-time good feeling that prevailed years ago . . . would be resumed and further exodus discontinued."¹²

Catts's address was entitled "What God Has Done for the Colored Race and the Attitude of the Administration." It revealed the ambivalence of this exuberant evangelist who genuinely wished to help the little people of Florida but who was also a white man in a community where blacks were believed to be inferior. He solemnly proclaimed that at the beginning of things whites occupied the colder climates and "the descendants of Ham" moved into the hot zones of the earth. He urged Negroes to remain in the warm climate where the "Creator had put (them)." After admonitions regarding morality, economy, and the need to plant victory gardens, the governor closed "with an eloquent peroration for unity of all people and races in the great state of Florida." With typical candor he told his audience that many turpentine and lumber operators had asked him to make the address "to help checkmate further exodus of labor from the state." It was also announced at the gathering that Robinson had been appointed assistant probation officer for Duval County "to work among the colored people only."¹³

11. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, June 28, 29, 30, 1917; Jacksonville *Florida Metropolis*, June 27, 29, 1917; Robinson, "Colored Laborers," RG 174, NA.

12. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, September 15, 1917.

13. *Ibid.*

Catts showed his interest in black citizens in other ways. When Jacksonville Negro leaders proposed the raising of a military regiment, Catts endorsed the idea, although he recommended that they choose at least three white officers "for the protection they would give."¹⁴ After the selective service began registering blacks for compulsory service, the army was reluctant to call them up. Catts supported the black cause much to the chagrin of the war department as well as several southern congressmen. When he and United States Senator Duncan Fletcher appealed to the war department, they were told that blacks were not being called because the problem of segregation of the races "had been most difficult." An early solution of the problem was promised, however, and within a month after Catts's intervention, the first black Floridians were ordered to report for duty.¹⁵

While the governor was characteristically employing direct action to serve his constituents who desired military service, he was indirectly exacerbating the problem of the labor shortage which had been threatening since blacks began leaving the state in 1916. Shipyards in Jacksonville, training camps in several localities, and growing port facilities created new demands for workers. More labor was also needed by the forest industries and agricultural enterprises which were expanding their production in behalf of the war effort. Where such influential politicians as former Governor Napoleon Bonaparte Broward and incumbent Congressman Frank Clark had once advocated sending blacks "back to Africa," Florida employers were now complaining of labor shortages and the unfair tactics of northern corporations who were enticing their work force away.

As the nation mobilized for war, the United States Employment Service was established to assist in placing workers in defense work jobs. The Florida office was in Jacksonville with Robert Gamble in charge. It was his duty to locate enough available workers to fill monthly quotas levied by the national office. When a severe shortage of skilled laborers occurred, he and Senator Fletcher were able to establish an industrial training school in Jacksonville so that unskilled workers could be trained. Some women were also able to find work in the shipyards because

14. *Ibid.*, April 2, 1917.

15. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 27, March 16, 1918.

of the shortage.¹⁶ The demand for defense workers made the Florida labor problem even more acute and caused greater concern among the lumber and turpentine interests. Suwannee County farmers also complained that so many blacks had left the area that they would be unable to gather the crops in 1918. Citrus and vegetable producers in peninsular Florida were also faced with severe labor shortages. To alleviate that problem, Professor P. H. Rolfs of the University of Florida who was serving as chairman of the Florida State Council for National Defense, obtained assistance from Congressman Clark and Senator Fletcher to have the immigration rules changed so that Bahamian laborers could be brought into the state. Upon payment of a head tax, the Department of Labor was authorized to issue permits for their importation during 1918 and early 1919.¹⁷

With large numbers of rural blacks finding employment in northern factories for the first time, many southern employers were wondering if their labor supply was not being drained off permanently. To make full use of available manpower for the war effort, the labor department established an agency to deal with problems arising from the migration. The Division of Negro Economics had as its head Dr. George E. Haynes, professor of sociology and economics at Fisk University and a secretary of the National Urban League. Field agents were attached to employment service offices in the states. The Division of Negro Economics' purpose was to promote "good feeling between the races" by resolving misunderstandings which might arise between blacks and whites in their new relationships. Its work was to be initiated by conferences held in the cooperating states to organize biracial workers' advisory committees in counties and cities. The field organization was shortly working in twelve northern and southern states which had been most affected by the migration of blacks. With both Governor Catts and Dr. Haynes present, a large group of blacks and whites met in Jacksonville in July 1918, and adopted plans for organizing a state Negro workers' advisory

16. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, August 29, September 14, 1918; Wayne Flynt, *Duncan Upshaw Fletcher* (Tallahassee, 1971), 109.

17. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, March 19, 1918; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, March 20, 1918, January 19, February 26, 1919; *New York Age*, February 1, 1919.

committee. Under the auspices of the state Council of National Defense, as well as the United States Employment Service, its goal was to promote better working relations between white employers and black employees. W. A. Armwood, a black drug store owner and school principal from Tampa, was named supervisor of the Division of Negro Economics for Florida. He would travel around the state representing the new agency.¹⁸

By early September 1918, all fifty-four of Florida's counties and the cities of Jacksonville, Tampa, Miami, and Pensacola had established biracial committees.¹⁹ In his speeches and in letters to Dr. Haynes, Governor Catts expressed his willingness to cooperate with the Division of Negro Economics to make its work successful in Florida.²⁰ Headed by President N. B. Young of Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College, the state committee, with subordinate groups in all the counties and major cities, operated much as the committees previously suggested by R. R. Robinson and his National Colored Protective Association. In its first few months of operation, the division was successful.²¹ As the labor shortage continued and the emphasis on work as a patriotic duty accelerated, several newspapers carried reports that some Negro women were quitting their jobs and living on allotments they were receiving from their husbands in the armed services. There were discussions of the need for compulsory work laws. To counter this course of action, President Young called a meeting of the state workers' advisory committee for Ocala in November 1918. An investigation showed that the allotment problem was not serious but that many blacks still did not understand the increased necessity to work. The committee adopted a program of cooperation between white employers, Negro churches, lodges, and local chapters of the Negro Business League to promote better understanding of the need to work "and to remove the discontent of workers" so that they would be more willing to help in producing war supplies and food. The Ocala conference was praised for its efforts to remedy the

18. George E. Haynes, *The Negro at Work During the World War and During Reconstruction* (Washington, 1921), 12-14, 65.

19. Jacksonville *Florida Metropolis*, September 12, 1918.

20. Haynes, *Negro at Work*, 64; *Chicago Defender*, November 9, 1918.

21. *New York Age*, December 21, 1918; Department of Labor, *Annual Report* (Washington, 1918), 113.

labor shortage without having to resort to plans of compulsory labor.²²

Then, just as it appeared that there was growing harmony between the races as well as between laborers and employers, the war ended in Europe. Rapid demobilization and the cutback on military contracts quickly reversed the demand for laborers, and by early 1919 it became apparent that there would be an increasing surplus of skilled workmen in Florida. At the same time, however, demand for timber, turpentine, and agricultural workers-jobs usually filled by blacks-remained high. The employment service estimated that about 3,000 black laborers were needed in Florida's forests and fields in early 1919. The war department had already agreed to lend its aid in solving the problem. Most returning servicemen were discharged at Fort Dix, New Jersey, but the military decided instead to muster out all blacks in their home states. The *Indianapolis Freeman* saw this as a measure to "insure a normal distribution of the Negroes to meet labor conditions in southern states."²³

Several developments in early 1919 exacerbated the labor problem. Rising prices, alarm over the numerous strikes and accompanying violence, race riots even in northern cities where such disruptions had heretofore seldom occurred, fear that Communism had or might permeate the American labor movement, and increasing harassment of whites against blacks caused anxiety and resentment. The harmony and good will which had seemed to be developing just a few months earlier now began to decline.

Negro newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender*, the *Indianapolis Freeman*, and the *New York Age* continued to urge southern blacks to migrate northward, and those who had already gone north to remain there now that the war was over. They understandably condemned the violence and lynchings in the South. Although these papers, and most others published by blacks at the time, limited their criticisms to the denial of civil and human rights to blacks, while supporting the American political system, the criticisms angered many white Southerners. The only important journal to attack American institutions and

22. *Ocala Star-Banner*, November 29, 1918; *Chicago Defender*, November 9, 1918.

23. *Indianapolis Freeman*, December 14, 1918; *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, January 4, 23, 29, February 2, 9, 25, 1919.

propose radical alterations was the *New York Messenger*, edited by A. Philip Randolph. Even black Jacksonville residents who remembered him as a youth growing up in their city were shocked at his editorials and denounced them vigorously.²⁴

Resentment toward the Negro press and alarm that Florida blacks were reading these papers, concern over the likelihood of further loss of their labor supply, and reaction to the general social unrest all over the nation caused white Floridians in 1919 to focus their frustrations on the Division of Negro Economics and its field representative, W. A. Armwood. Viewing unionization of labor as radical, dangerous, and something to be resisted, several lumber operators who belonged to the Georgia-Florida Sawmill Association noted that Armwood was traveling around the state speaking to numerous groups of black laborers. They asked him to use his influence to keep those working in the forest industries from joining unions. Armwood politely explained that he was a government official and was obliged to remain neutral. His protestation of neutrality convinced the lumber men that Armwood was actually a union advocate who was secretly urging the blacks to unionize. In early 1919 the Georgia-Florida Sawmill Association launched a campaign to have Armwood removed from Florida on the grounds that his activities were injurious to peace and harmony. They were able to persuade Gideon B. Travis, who had replaced Robert Gamble as director of the United States Employment Service in Florida, that Armwood was guilty, and he recommended that he be dismissed. Dr. Haynes, however, managed to counteract this action with the explanation that Armwood's mission was to work toward improving employee-employer relations and that of necessity he had to travel to where the laborers lived.²⁵

Both Congressman Herbert Jackson Drane and Senator Fletcher were asked by M. J. Scanlon of the Brooks-Scanlon Corporation, a Minnesota-based firm with large operations in Florida, to assist them in forcing Armwood to leave the state. In addition to the unionizing charge, Scanlon also accused Armwood of spreading "inflammatory literature." About the same

24. Levy, *James Weldon Johnson*, 192; Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (New York, 1972), 118.

25. George E. Haynes to William B. Wilson, March 22, 1919, Chief Clerk's Files, Department of Labor, RG 174, NA.

time a Mr. Ward, auditor of the Georgia-Florida Sawmill Association, called on the Secretary of Labor and made the same charge. Dr. Haynes was called in to confer with Ward. Armwood and N. B. Young were in Washington at the time, and they were invited to join the conference. The three black leaders explained that the Division of Negro Economics had been originated at the call of Governor Catts, that white citizens from every county served on the local committees, that Armwood was and always had been under the direct supervision of the Florida director of the United States Employment Service, and that his sole mission was to promote understanding. This was not enough for Ward; he still wanted Armwood and the agency withdrawn from Florida.²⁶

Shortly afterward, Scanlon arrived in Washington to take personal charge of the matter. In a friendly interview Haynes apparently explained to Scanlon's satisfaction that his agency had no other purpose than to improve cooperation and good will between white employers and black employees, and insofar as possible, to alleviate difficulties between black and white employees. The lumberman agreed to arrange a meeting of the executive board of the Georgia-Florida Sawmill Association in Jacksonville so that Haynes could address its members on the controversial issue.²⁷

Haynes went to Jacksonville, but in the interim other difficulties arose. By January 1919 the United States Employment Service was locating about 1,200 returning servicemen per month in Florida and was beginning to experience difficulty in finding jobs for all veterans desiring them. Meanwhile, the shortage of agricultural, lumber, and turpentine workers continued despite the war department's policy of discharging black servicemen in their home states. Then it was announced that the employment service would be demobilized by April 1. The Division of Negro Economics would be continued but reassigned to another branch of the labor department. In reporting this change, the Jacksonville *Florida Metropolis* led a new attack on Armwood. The paper claimed that the employment service was being discontinued just as the difficulty of finding jobs for returning white soldiers and

26. Report on Negro Economics in Florida, Division of Negro Economics, Department of Labor, RG 174, NA.

27. Haynes to M. J. Scanlon, March 7, 1919, in *ibid.*

sailors was increasing, while the "service which looks to the welfare of negroes" was being continued.²⁸

Secretary of Labor W. B. Wilson continued to receive complaints of Armwood's distribution of "extremely radical racial literature" and the alleged "secret organizations" which were being formed as a result. He ordered Haynes to send one white and one black investigator to "quietly investigate the alleged activities of our representative in this connection." Without his knowledge, the two men retraced Armwood's path across Florida, questioning employers and employees about his activities. They found no evidence to support the allegations, but there was reason to believe that he had helped to improve race relations. Several lumber operators acknowledged that the misleading newspaper article was the cause of most of the resentment toward the Division of Negro Economics.²⁹

This report did not stop the controversy. Ward continued his complaints of Armwood to Washington. Senator Fletcher contacted the labor department declaring his concern at the amount of mail he was receiving on the subject. Secretary Wilson and Dr. Haynes decided to seek advice from Governor Catts and Robert Gamble. Telegrams were sent to both men on March 22, 1919, explaining the errors in the *Metropolis* article and reiterating the stated purpose of the Division of Negro Economics. The telegrams asked if the continuance of the division in Florida would have any effect other than the promotion of good will and cooperation between whites and blacks. There is no record of Gamble's reply, but Governor Catts's answer caused the national government to decide to withdraw the Division of Negro Economics from the entire South. Southern states would be left to handle their own affairs as had been done forty-two years earlier after the Hayes-Tilden election dispute of 1876.³⁰

Catts was being beleaguered on several fronts at this time, but the labor situation was causing him particular difficulty. Race relations had degenerated markedly since 1917. Blacks were beginning to speak out in Florida, as well as through their national press, against their mistreatment by state and local governments dominated by white men. In early January 1919, R. E. S.

28. Jacksonville *Florida Metropolis*, March 15, 1919.

29. Report on Negro Economics in Florida, RG 174, NA.

30. Haynes to Governor Catts, March 22, 1919, in *ibid*.

Toomey, a black attorney from Miami, had organized a state-wide Negro Uplift Association to advocate improvement of schools for black children, admission of Negroes to juries, and desegregation of public facilities such as railroad depot waiting rooms. With R. G. Lee serving as president and S. H. Savage as secretary, the Uplift Association scheduled a convention at Ocala on April 23. The association decided to send a committee to call upon the legislature when it convened. When its representatives began addressing a legislative committee, state Senator J. B. Johnson of Live Oak interrupted the reading of their petition. Moving that it not be heard, Johnson said that the proposal was obnoxious because it referred to blacks as Doctor, Mrs., Reverend, and Lieutenant. The clerk was prevented from entering the petition in the record of legislative proceedings, and the committee was subsequently ignored.³¹

Catts explained that he had no control over the legislature's conduct, but his own antipathy toward Negroes who forgot their traditional roles was revealed in another way. At about the same time he received the telegram asking for advice on the Division of Negro Economics, he was engaged in a quarrel with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. It was the policy of the NAACP to notify governors when lynchings occurred in their states and to ask them to help bring the culprits to justice. Two lynchings had occurred in Florida in March 1919. After shooting a night watchman at Greenville, Joe Walker had been taken from arresting officers on the way to the Madison County jail and was shot to death by a mob. Bud Johnson, accused of raping a white woman near Pace, was removed from the Escambia County sheriff's custody and was burned to death.³²

John R. Shillady, white secretary of the NAACP, urged Catts to see that the guilty persons were punished. The governor was furious. Although he had tried to prevent such things from happening in Florida, it would be impossible to bring the

31. Committee members were the Reverend J. A. Gregg, Duval County; Reverend H. Y. Tookes, Madison County; Reverend S. H. Betts, Jackson County; Dr. W. G. Wilson, Marion County; R. G. Lee, Palm Beach County; Reverend J. W. Robinson, Bradford County; and C. C. Manigault, Duval County. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, February 4, 1919; *Chicago Defender*, May 10, 14, 1919; *New York Age*, May 10, 1919.

32. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, March 19, 1919; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, March 14, 1919.

lynchers to trial. "When a Negro brute or white man ravishes a white woman in the state of Florida there is no use having the people, who see that this man meets death, brought to trial, even if you could find who they are, the citizenship [*sic*] will not stand for it." Catts then took issue with Shillady's assertion that burning a person to death was a horrible act: "Your Race is always harping on the disgrace it brings to the state by a course of white people taking revenge for the dishonoring of a white woman, when if you would spend one-half the time that you do, in giving maudlin sympathy, to teaching your people not to kill our white officers and disgrace our white women, you would keep down a thousand times greater disgrace." Warming to his subject, Catts added that he did not like "the tone of your telegram," and, while he had "tried to be fair to your people at all times," he did not believe in "such maudlin sentiment" as that revealed in Shillady's message. Shocked at the governor's response, Shillady retorted that had he not read the words himself, he could not have believed that "you as governor of a great state find it possible to apologize for burning at the stake." The NAACP felt that justification of lynching by pleading the wickedness of the crime was not the way to uphold the law. Although the distinction was probably not important to the governor, Shillady cautioned that, "incidentally, I do not happen to be a Negro myself."³³

Embroiled with the NAACP over the lynchings, with the Negro Uplift Association convention at Ocala pending, and under pressure from the Georgia-Florida Sawmill Association members, Catts was in a poor frame of mind to receive a telegram on March 22 from the Department of Labor. After a brief investigation of the problem the governor telegraphed Secretary Wilson that the Division of Negro Economics should be discontinued. When Armwood visited the governor in Tallahassee and protested his recommendation, Catts held meetings at Jacksonville and De Funiak Springs to obtain additional opinions of white Floridians regarding the issue. Reassured in his earlier recommendation, he warned the Secretary of Labor that "unless the denunciatory editorials being published by several negro papers . . . against the white people of the South, inflaming the

33. Catts to John R. Shillady, March 13, 1919, and Shillady to Catts, March 23, 1919, quoted in *Chicago Defender*, April 19, 1919.

minds of negroes against the white people of Florida, is not stopped, and the Bureau of Home Economics for negroes [*sic*] discontinued, it will cause more trouble." He reminded the secretary that "the white people of the South had a great deal of trouble in the old Reconstruction days with the scallawag negro officers and white carpetbagger officers, who came down to rule over them."³⁴ Catts wanted "the inflamed editorials, coming out in Negro papers from the North and West" to be suppressed. Secretary Wilson explained that he had no authority to stop publication of newspapers and that there was no agency known as the "Bureau of Home Economics for Negroes," but only the Division of Negro Economics. Undaunted by such fine points, Catts replied that "regardless of what the work is called, it will be deeply resented by the white people . . . if a negro is employed and sent through Florida doing this work and at the same time (you) cut out the white officials employed by your Department." Wilson then suspended the division in Florida, the only state where it had encountered any difficulty.³⁵

Although he had projected himself as the friend and benefactor of Florida blacks when he first assumed office in 1917, Catts had by early 1919 become the staunch defender of white supremacy because "war conditions have so changed the negroes in the South." On March 4, 1919, he had attended a Washington conference called to try to improve the field operations of the Division of Negro Economics. But when Wilson called a conference in late April - after the exchange of letters in which Catts recommended discontinuance of the division and after his encounter with Shillady of the NAACP - to try to resolve the division's mounting difficulties, Catts appointed W. W. Phillips, a legislator from Lake City, to represent him.³⁶

With representatives from every southern state present, the conference soon showed that most of their regional neighbors agreed with white Floridians about the migrations of blacks to the North as well as the need to discontinue the Division of Negro Economics. A plan was agreed upon to withdraw all the division's field representatives and to allow the states to conduct

34. Catts to William B. Wilson, April 7, 1919, RG 174, NA.

35. L. F. Post to Catts, April 16, 1919; Catts to Wilson, April 22, 1919, Chief Clerk's Files, Department of Labor, RG 174, NA.

36. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 22, 1919.

whatever employment services they chose. The Washington office would continue merely as a clearing house for laborers who moved from one state to another.

Phillips became a member of a committee to draft proposed legislation by which Congress was asked to authorize the states to handle their own labor problems. Florida newspapers praised Phillips for ridding the state of the "Negro Labor Bureau Man." Congress did not appropriate funds for the division, but Secretary Wilson managed to continue it from emergency funds in its diminished capacity. Haynes remained as director, but he had no field staff. The agency ended with the expiration of President Woodrow Wilson's term.³⁷

Race relations continued to deteriorate throughout 1919, and labor shortages in the lumber industry and migration of blacks from the state remained major problems and the cause of continuing bad feeling in Florida. At its annual meeting in Pensacola in June, the Georgia-Florida Sawmill Association again called attention to the difficulty of its members in meeting demands for lumber because of their inability to find enough workers.³⁸

The Chicago Chamber of Commerce was apparently concerned that the demobilization of defense industries would leave their city with unemployed Negroes recently arrived from the South. The Chamber telegraphed their counterparts in several southern states: "Are you in need of Negro labor? Large surplus here, both returned soldiers and civilian Negroes, ready to go to work." Both chambers of commerce and individual business men, especially from Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi, responded, but Negro newspapers advised their readers not to be misled by latter-day promises of fair treatment. The *Chicago Defender* suggested that one plan was "to get the people back, get them declared vagrants by the courts and then immediately pay their fines and put them to work under the peonage system."³⁹ Although it was this kind of editorial which had so enraged Florida employers and governing officials, it was not without foundation. The 1919 Florida legislature had enacted a

37. *Ibid.*, April 29, 1919; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 29, 1919; Department of Labor, *Annual Report* (Washington, 1920), 41.

38. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, June 21, 1919.

39. *Chicago Defender*, May 3, 17, 1919.

law which provided the legal basis for a similar and equally effective plan. Anyone who agreed to perform labor and then failed to live up to his promise would be guilty of a misdemeanor and subject to a fine up to \$500. Failure to perform constituted prima facie evidence of fraud. Under this statute, an employer could interpret many acts to mean failure to perform.⁴⁰

The *Defender* editorialized that the same people who “proclaimed but yesterday that we were a nuisance, a problem, and retarded the growth of their section” were “now bidding for us to come back.” But if the South wanted the blacks to return, the paper continued, “let it tame its white savages, let there be a rigid and equal enforcement of the laws. No man can feel safe in any section that has one law for one class and one law for another. One can scarcely pick up a daily paper without reading of some dastardly exhibition of savagery on the part of the lawless white element of the South. Still they are asking us to return. . . . Like any other human beings, we want schools for our children, protection for our wives and daughters and safety for ourselves.”⁴¹ A few days later the *Defender* carried an editorial entitled, “Laborers are Wanted Where There is no Lynching and Burning.”⁴²

Governor Catts and the Georgia-Florida Sawmill Association were joined by others who called for the suppression of this “radical racial literature.” In early September 1919 Congressman James F. Byrnes of South Carolina denounced several Negro newspapers as seditious and in violation of the espionage law. “These radical leaders are urging their followers to resort to violence in order to obtain privileges they believe themselves entitled to, and the recent riots indicate that they are accepting this advice.”⁴³ Alabama Congressman John McDuffie asked Postmaster General Albert Bursleson to deny the mails to these newspapers.⁴⁴ President Wilson finally felt obliged to announce that no such action could be taken.⁴⁵

For James Weldon Johnson, two lynchings in Jacksonville in mid-September 1919, measured the deterioration in race relations

40. *Laws of Florida*, 1919, 286.

41. *Chicago Defender*, May 17, 1919.

42. *Ibid.*, May 24, 1919.

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Indianapolis Freeman*, October 18, 1919.

45. *Chicago Defender*, May 24, 1919.

in his native state. Two blacks, in jail for murder, were taken out by a mob, shot to death, and then left in the streets of the Jacksonville business district. Johnson lamented: "Jacksonville is the birthplace of the writer. For many years it was known as a most liberal city for colored people. We have received a number of letters from colored residents of the city. One . . . is taken up entirely with the shame of the city. We have no doubt that there are many of the older colored residents of Jacksonville who are as much pained by the fact that their city has been thus disgraced as they are at the fact of the lynching itself."⁴⁶

For Johnson, the one redeeming fact was a resolution by the Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce declaring that the city was not a "lynch law community," and that "in no instance has lynch law prevailed in Duval County during the memory of the oldest inhabitant."⁴⁷ But six weeks later Johnson's *New York Age* carried an editorial entitled "Terrorism is Playing a Big Part in the South Today." Respected black residents of several southern cities, he noted, were being driven from their homes, and "from Jacksonville, Florida, comes the rumor that a number of leading colored men of that city have been notified that they must go."⁴⁸

In July 1920, several white men drove a car through the "colored section" of Miami and tossed out a dynamite bomb. Its explosion brought forth 3,000 indignant blacks and the entire police force. The mayor called out the American Legion at midnight and by daybreak 400 armed men were patrolling the streets.⁴⁹ Lynchings and similar violence continued in other southern states. The *Indianapolis Freeman* declared that "there is another mighty exodus of the colored people on from the South. It is not economic this time, . . . but due to an epidemic of intimidation and lynching."⁵⁰

The violence was climaxed with a pitched battle at Ocoee near Orlando in Orange County on election day, 1920. Two white men were killed and at least ten others wounded in a battle

46. *New York Age*, September 20, 1919.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*, November 1, 1919; *Indianapolis Freeman*, September 20, 1919.

49. *Indianapolis Freeman*, July 31, 1920; Paul George, "Colored Town: Miami's Black Community, 1896-1930," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, LVI (April 1978), 445-46.

50. *Indianapolis Freeman*, July 31, 1920. George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1967), 154-55.

which destroyed the Negro section of the town. Harry White, an NAACP investigator, claimed that "July Perry and an unknown number of colored killed at the scene of the riot, 25 colored houses, 2 colored churches and a colored lodge destroyed by fire." He estimated that thirty people were killed in the fighting which lasted more than a full day.⁵¹ "A gruesome cremation scene was exposed to all . . . as the morning sun peeped over the smoke laden battlefield," according to one observer. The same reporter declared that "practically all of the colored residents in the vicinity of the place had left the region, mostly by foot, as there was no exodus by rail."⁵² There was irony resulting from the macabre event. After complaining of shortages of black laborers for several years, white citizens were obliged to harvest their citrus crops themselves since nearly all the blacks had been killed or driven away.⁵³ In a sense the Ocoee incident was a microcosmic example of the entire labor situation since 1916. On the one hand white Floridians were treating blacks so poorly that many felt forced to flee the state in order to survive, while on the other they were bemoaning the loss of what they had come to regard as a perpetual labor supply.

But few lessons were learned either from the Ocoee incident or from the other tragic events. The Ocoee incident was repeated on a slightly smaller scale when both blacks and whites were killed in a 1923 riot resulting in the dissolution of the community of Rosewood near Cedar Key. In the same year Sam Carter was lynched by a mob near Bronson because he had harbored a fugitive trying to escape from another mob, and Abe Wilson was hanged near Newberry after his conviction for cattle stealing.⁵⁴ At the same time, either the demand for lumber diminished sharply or the lumber operators had been exaggerating the labor shortage in the mills and forests. At its November 1920 convention at Tampa, the Georgia-Florida Sawmill Associa-

51. *Indianapolis Freeman*, November 20, 1920; James Weldon Johnson to A. Mitchell Palmer, November 12, 1920, NAACP Papers, C-351, Library of Congress, Washington.

52. *Indianapolis Freeman*, November 20, 1920.

53. *Ibid.*, December 25, 1920.

54. Levy, *James Weldon Johnson*, 218-19; Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 155; *Literary Digest*, LXXVI (1923), 11-12; *New York Tribune*, January 3, 1923.

tion adopted a reduced wage scale which they declared the only alternative to closing the mills.⁵⁵

As Florida entered a period of phenomenal growth in the early 1920s, its black residents remained in a status not unlike that which they had endured before 1916. Anticipating large adjustment problems resulting from the hundreds of thousands of blacks moving into northern industrial areas during the war years, and with greater willingness to exert national governmental authority on behalf of the war effort, the newly established United States Department of Labor had created the Division of Negro Economics and charged it with the goal of resolving disputes between the races and between labor and management in the interest of all parties. It sent one black supervisor into each of several southern states to carry out this mission. Then, because of resistance from Florida and the shrill threats of Governor Catts, Washington recoiled immediately and withdrew from the field. This became the only example of the national government's intervention in the South in an area touching on racial affairs between the ending of Reconstruction in the late nineteenth century and the school desegregation activities of the 1950s.

Because of his personality and the way he had become governor, Sidney Catts emerged as a key figure in the controversy over black migration. While his actions toward blacks in 1917 and 1919 may at first appear contradictory, closer examination suggests that he was actually quite consistent. He was sincere when, in 1917, he told Jacksonville blacks that he intended to be governor of all Floridians and when he assisted Robert Raymond Robinson and his National Colored Protective Association in establishing committees to work toward better racial relations. But that sincerity was within the overarching limitation of white supremacy. Every action he had taken had been with the assumption that whites were superior to and different from blacks. His appointment of Robinson had been with the understanding that the black man was to deal only with the youth of his race. His insistence that blacks be called up for military service as a matter of right was done with the knowledge that they would be segregated from white soldiers. He had even recommended that their

55. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, November 5, 1920.

militia unit elect some white officers because the latter could better represent them in a world where whites were in charge.

In 1919 Catts and his worried white constituents believed that their social system was being threatened. The governor felt compelled to defend the racial customs of his state, customs in which he firmly believed. His dealings with Director Haynes and Secretary Shillady showed that he considered himself the representative of white Floridians associating with the spokesmen for blacks-including black Floridians. For Catts and most of his white constituents, blacks were simply not part of the community of Floridians, except in the restricted, subservient role that was set aside for them.