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The New Great Migration

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Cathy Gathers-Robinson and Jim Robinson, a couple in their 60s, recently retired from Pittsburgh to Jonesboro, Ga., outside of Atlanta. (Courtesy Branden Camp for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette)



Cathy Gathers-Robinson and Jim Robinson, a couple in their 60s, recently retired from Pittsburgh to Jonesboro, Ga., outside of Atlanta. (Courtesy Branden Camp for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette)

Economic and cultural factors have made the New South more appealing than Pittsburgh for many ambitious African-Americans

By Gary Rotstein Pittsburgh Post-Gazette FEB. 26, 2017

Jim Robinson and Cathy Gathers-Robinson spent their lives in Pittsburgh before the couple retired last year to an Atlanta area that provides both a warm climate and comfortable environment, surrounding them with many African-Americans with economic achievements like theirs.

“Black people here are doctors, they’re lawyers, they’re homeowners, they’re business owners — you don’t see

that in Pittsburgh,” said Mr. Robinson, a former technician and traveling customer service representative for PPG Industries.

He and his wife, a former nurse, trace their grandparents’ roots to Georgia, South Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee, and they are hardly alone as black ex-Pittsburghers who have moved to the South. They’re among many Northerners of color who have flocked back to a region their ancestors fled for much of the 20th century.

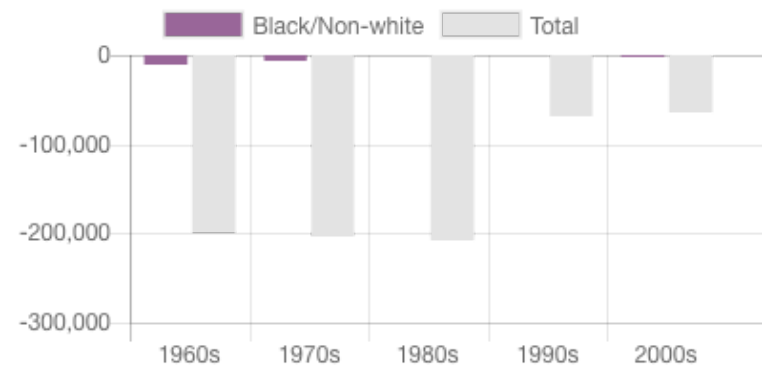
In what became known as the Great Migration, millions of blacks raised amid the South’s Jim Crow practices and farm-based economy trekked above the Mason-Dixon line in pursuit of better racial attitudes and job opportunities. The reverse is more recently true, in a national trend with its own storyline in southwestern Pennsylvania, where economic indicators for African-Americans have trailed far behind those of blacks in other major cities, North or South.

Since the 1960s — even earlier than for other Northern cities — more blacks have been leaving Pittsburgh than arriving in it. The region’s black population has not declined like the number of whites, due to African-Americans’ higher birth rates, but their negative exchange rate has shown up in data for five straight decades. The expatriates’ focus has been the New South, which spans the triangle from the nation’s capital to Florida and Texas, with Atlanta in-between long dubbed the “black mecca.”

Among the exodus, each with their own story but often sharing a lament about the region’s limited opportunities or narrow attitudes hampering satisfaction with southwestern Pennsylvania:

Out migration

The Pittsburgh metropolitan area hemorrhaged population from 1960 to 2010 as people moved to other parts of the country. The decade breakdowns below show the estimated net out-migration overall for the region and among black residents in particular from Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Fayette, Washington and Westmoreland counties.



Totals:	
Black/Non-white	-20,565*
Total	-743,788

* plus 1980s losses

Note: Results are based on census data and birth and death records, which were not broken down by race for the 1980s.

Note: From 1960 to 1979, population was tracked as white or non-white. Most of the non-white population here was African-American.

Source: Applied Population Laboratory at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

Michelle King, now a Richmond, Va., resident, graduated from high school in Hazelwood in 1976 and heeded a grandmother's judgment that the then-Steel City offered little future for a smart, ambitious, young black woman.

Shirley Ballard Foster lived here during the 1980s, working in a bank management position, but left in 1990 and ultimately returned to her hometown of Greensboro, N.C. She calls herself a "blackbird" migrating back to where there's not just warmer weather but the type of large, black, middle-class population she never found in Pittsburgh.

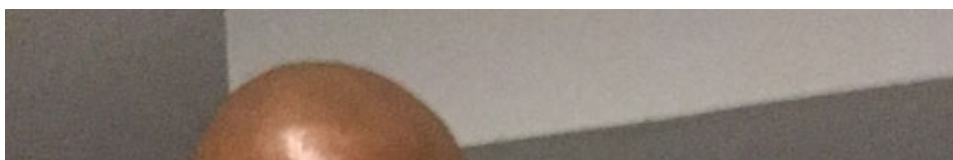
Sterling Stone, a 1996 Woodland Hills High School graduate, has been in Washington, D.C. since 2002, enjoying its abundance of people of every color and nationality and the diverse cultural opportunities available.

And more recently there's North Braddock-raised musician Gene Walker, who counts 61 Pittsburgh-themed T-shirts in his wardrobe. Despite that, since 2014 he's been enjoying an Austin, Texas, vibe he considers more readily accepting of people from whatever background.

Like every other black ex-Pittsburgher interviewed for this story, Mr. Walker expressed strong attachment to Pittsburgh friends and family and affection for the city, but he also described it as having an "old school mindset, like sometimes people are quick to judge someone based on how they look."

They are all part of what national demographer William Frey has studied and called "The New Great Migration," the modern population reversal resulting from an upheaval in the economic opportunities and political climate pertaining to black Americans. In Atlanta and many other Southern cities, they are now frequently the power-brokers instead of the oppressed.

"The reversal of the Great Migration out of the South began as a trickle in the 1970s, increased in the 1990s, and turned into a virtual evacuation from many northern areas in the first decade of the 2000s," the Brookings Institution analyst wrote in 2014.





Gene Walker (Courtesy of Gene Walker)

The percentage of U.S. blacks living in the South, which stood at 90 percent in 1900, rose to 57 percent by 2010 after dropping as low as 53 percent in 1970. Those moving southward in recent decades, Mr. Frey notes, largely represent the more well-educated, higher-income portion of the black population.

Uniquely part of a mass exodus

Pittsburgh is at the same time part of the reverse migration trend and its own separate story.

Foremost as a distinction, for at least a half century a colorblind exodus — driven first by a manufacturing slowdown and then a collapse — drained the Pittsburgh region of population like nowhere else in the Rust Belt. An analysis by the [Applied Population Laboratory at the University of Wisconsin-Madison](http://www.netmigration.wisc.edu/) (<http://www.netmigration.wisc.edu/>) estimated that the seven-county Pittsburgh metro suffered net migration loss of nearly 750,000 people to other parts of the country from 1960-2010. At least 20,000 of those departures — perhaps 30,000 — were African-Americans, according to the analysis.

Many of the out-migrants were working-age people whose jobs or futures had been tied to the steel industry or related sectors. The relatively small number of African-Americans who departed partly reflects how the region never grew a black population equivalent in size to comparable urban centers like Cleveland, Detroit and Philadelphia.

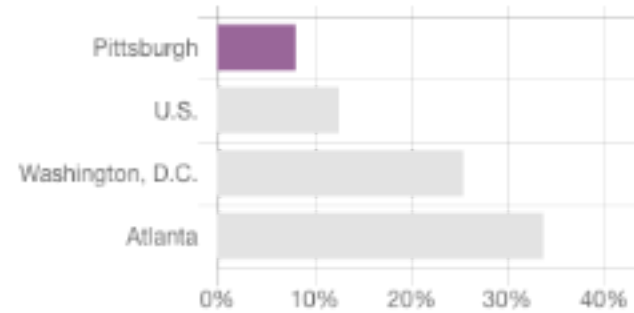
The most recent census estimates place metropolitan Pittsburgh’s black population at about 8 percent of its total, compared to 12.7 percent nationally and higher still in most major cities. Pittsburgh has the fewest minorities of any kind among metropolitan areas of greater than 1 million residents.

At the same time, key economic indicators suggest the black population is far worse off here than in other cities and their situation has gotten worse over time. Median income for black households in the metropolitan area (Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Fayette, Washington and Westmoreland counties) was reported in 2015 to be \$26,330, compared to \$36,544 nationally.

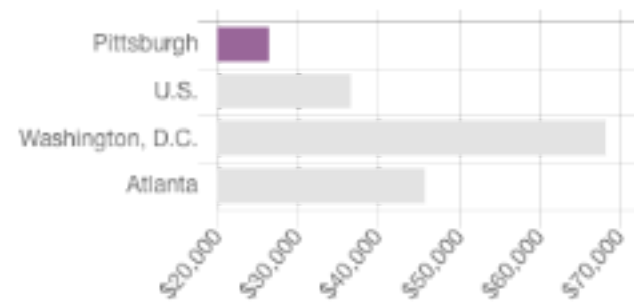
The region's black gap

Blacks in the seven-county Pittsburgh metropolitan area are less numerous and fare poorly on key economic indicators compared to those nationally and in the Southern metros to which they most commonly relocate.

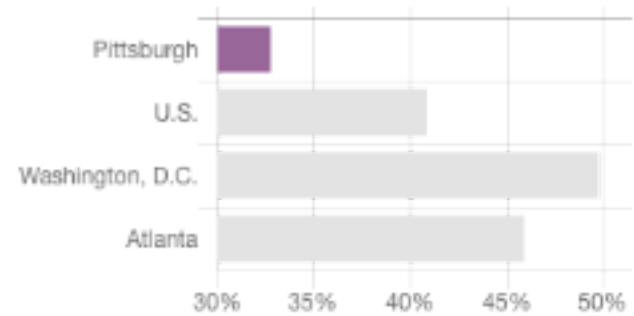
Black percentage of population



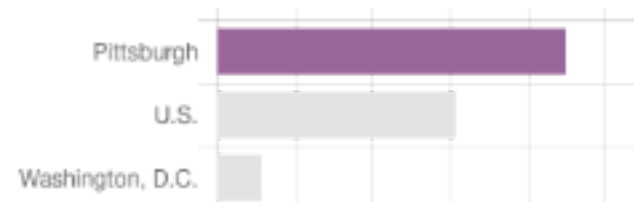
Black household median income



Percentage of blacks who own homes



Poverty rate among blacks





Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2015 American Community Survey, based on respondents identifying their only race as African-American

It makes sense that black income is relatively low here, as white income is also below national norms. More striking is the sharp disparity between blacks and whites. Black household income in the Pittsburgh area stood at 46 percent that of whites in 2015, compared to 61.2 percent for blacks nationally. In 1990, the area's black income was nearly 53 percent that of whites.

Unusually large disparities also have existed here for home ownership and poverty. In analyzing the nation's 52 largest metro areas in 2015, Forbes magazine placed Pittsburgh 48th for how blacks fared economically, tied with San Francisco and ahead of only Cincinnati, Grand Rapids, Mich., and Milwaukee.

To the extent Pittsburgh has a success story of replacing the steel industry with jobs in education, health care and technology, it has eluded the region's black residents.

"You need to come in [to those fields] with more than a bachelor's degree, and there's no ladder up," said Larry E. Davis, director of the University of Pittsburgh's Center on Race and Social Problems. "The manufacturing here went down and it was replaced by something African-Americans were not part of."

Blacks elsewhere offer contrast

Michelle King, 58, whose father worked at the former U.S. Steel Corp. Homestead steel plant, vividly recalls her childhood conversations with her grandmother, a housekeeper for Squirrel Hill families. When a student at Gladstone High School, Ms. King participated in a college prep program at Carnegie Mellon University. She had ambitions that went far beyond the still-active mills of the 1970s.





Michelle King left Pittsburgh to attend Spelman College in Atlanta. (Courtesy of Michelle King)

“My grandmother told me, ‘Girl, you want to get anywhere, you going to have to leave Pittsburgh.’ She didn’t feel there were any opportunities for African-Americans,” Ms. King said. “My father and grandfather both worked in steel mills, and it was bred into you that if you wanted to make it professionally, you were going to have to leave Pittsburgh.”

Those mills bolstered local blacks’ income, just like that of blue-collar whites, for much of the 20th century. But African-Americans were also more likely to be among the last hired and first fired during the manufacturing sector’s up-and-down cycles, so the eventual bottoming out hit them particularly hard, said Joe William Trotter Jr., director of CMU’s Center for Africanamerican Urban Studies and the Economy.

“The job structure open to African-Americans in Pittsburgh may have been less diverse than in other cities, almost solely dependent on steel, which encouraged less black middle-class growth,” he said.

Ms. King didn’t wait around for the collapse affecting workers like her father. She went away to Spelman College in Atlanta, a black institution for women, where even four decades ago — before that city really boomed and long before the Robinsons’ similar adjustment — she encountered a different black culture from what she’d known in Pittsburgh.

“These girls were coming to school with Trans Ams and designer luggage,” she recalled. “With a father who was a steelworker and my mother as a social worker, we were middle class compared to the people living around us, but I was nowhere near these girls who were daughters of doctors and lawyers and were the ones with housekeepers.”

With her Spelman economics degree, Ms. King worked for businesses in Detroit and Huntsville, Ala., before becoming a longtime production supervisor in Richmond for the Philip Morris tobacco company. Like Atlanta, Virginia’s capital has attractive black suburbs, African-Americans as political decision-makers, an abundant black population and a slew of culture that appeals to them.

Ms. King still likes visiting Pittsburgh, but it can be a stark adjustment.

“People visiting [from Richmond] with me say, ‘Where are the black people?’” she says. “Very few of my friends

that stayed in Pittsburgh really made anything of themselves — they’re either struggling or just trying to make it. ... The ones that I know that have left have had a lot more success, as far as the professional ranks.”

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Lack of diversity feels isolating

A common thread among African-Americans who have worked in professional capacities in Pittsburgh is a sense of isolation, of frequently being the only one who looks like them in a meeting or workplace or nice restaurant. The extent to which it bothered them varies, but it was one factor in driving people away.

Shirley Ballard Foster, 70, the self-described “blackbird” who flew back home to North Carolina — partly driven away by Pittsburgh’s weather — said she was frequently “the only professional black” in the banks where she worked while here in the 1980s.

When arriving in Pittsburgh and receiving advice on where to live, she was aghast when directed to Homewood and the Hill — places where living conditions were nowhere near what she had been accustomed to among working blacks in other cities. African-Americans who had money here seemed to her primarily blue-collar workers interested in bar-drinking as a social or cultural pursuit.

“It was a culture shock in terms of what it meant to be a middle-class black,” Ms. Ballard Foster said. “I surmised that it was because of the steel mills that they could make a lot of money, and the women weren’t expected to do much more than be a teller or secretary, and going to college for the average black woman was unheard of unless they were already from Fox Chapel.”

She eventually made good friends among other black professional women who were largely transplants like herself, but left after a decade here for Atlanta and then her hometown of Greensboro.

DaiQuan Medley, 19, rushes in to disassemble a bike wheel during a race with other youth mechanics as Sterling Stone, right, lets go of the wheel. Mr. Stone, a Woodland Hills graduate, is the executive director of the

Sterling Stone, right, lets go of the wheel. Mr. Stone, a Woodland Hills graduate, is the executive director of the nonprofit bike shop. (Rebecca Droke/Post-Gazette)



DaiQuan Medley, 19, rushes in to disassemble a bike wheel during a race with other youth mechanics as Sterling Stone, right, lets go of the wheel. Mr. Stone, a Woodland Hills graduate, is the executive director of the nonprofit bike shop. (Rebecca Droke/Post-Gazette)

Sterling Stone, 38, is a Braddock native of a different gender and generation from Ms. Foster, but some of their perspectives overlap. Now gone 15 years to Washington, where he is executive director of a nonprofit agency, Mr. Stone remembers there being few role models here for a young black man.

He mixed easily at Woodland Hills High School with white people and remains close with Pittsburgh friends of both races, but the nation's capital offers a vast contrast in terms of how an educated black man with ambition fits in.





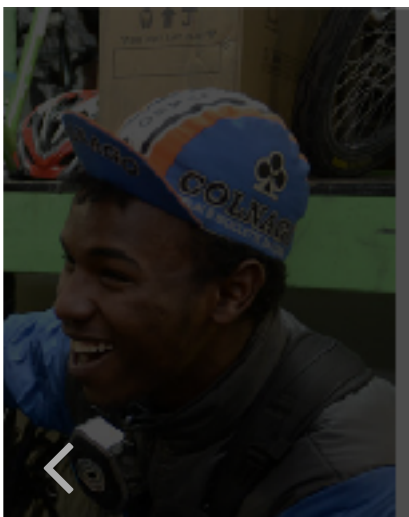
Shirley Ballard Foster, who worked in banking in Pittsburgh in the 1980s, attends a committee meeting at the Greensboro Public Library in Greensboro, N.C., the hometown to which she returned. (Andrew Krech/News & Record)

“It was few and far between in Pittsburgh that you would hop on a bus and see a group of young black men in a suit and tie on their way to work,” he recalled. In Washington, “you see the black man dressed like that next to the white guy and the Asian guy, and you turn on the TV and half the city council is African-American.”

While Mr. Stone in many ways remains a Pittsburgh booster — he was president of the DC Steeler Nation club for five years — it’s not part of his agenda to move back to a region he sees having too much “close-mindedness.” There’s more appeal in D.C., where “I appreciate that any time I go out I might run into someone from a different part of the country or different part of the world, where there are different social views or political views or whatever.”

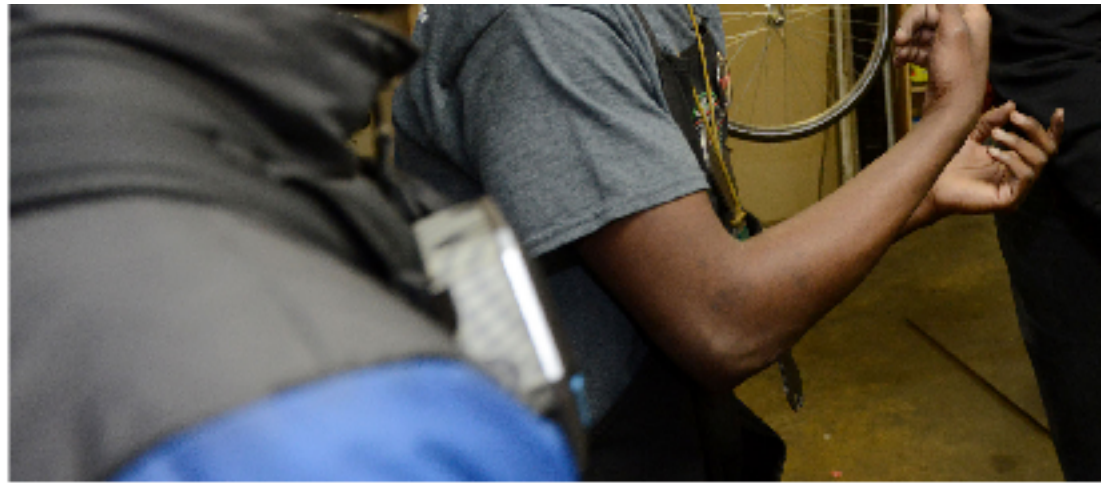
Atlanta, D.C. are lure for many

A USA Today analysis using data from the most recent full census examined the 2005-10 period and found Atlanta and Washington were the two most common metropolitan areas to which black Pittsburghers migrated. Overall local net out-migration was estimated at 614 annually, with 274 ending up in Atlanta and 169 in D.C. Only New York, Chicago and Los Angeles were reported sending more black migrants to Atlanta, and only Philadelphia and New York were losing more to the nation’s capital.





...vie to pick Mr. Medley to be on
disassembling a bike wheel hub,
(Post-Gazette)



As Mikiase Kebede, 19, left, and DaiQuan Medley, 19, prepare to disassemble a bike wh
mechanics, Sterling Stone, right, keeps them from starting early. Mr. Stone is the executive c
Gearin' Up Bicycles in Northeast Washington, D.C., that gives career development opportuni
to teenagers from underserved communities. (Rebecca Droke/Post-

Washington makes sense for Mr. Stone and others as a relatively close, diverse area with virtually recession-proof economy due to the federal government. Atlanta, while farther away, attracts African-Americans like the Robinsons from across the country with its economic and cultural vibrancy in which blacks are immersed.

The relative success of those regions' black populations compared to Pittsburgh's is striking, whether by income or other standards. Half the blacks in metropolitan D.C. own their home and 46 percent of Atlantans do so, compared to 33 percent of blacks in the Pittsburgh metro. More than one of four blacks in Atlanta and Washington hold bachelor's degrees or higher, compared to fewer than one of six black Pittsburghers.

Mr. Frey, the national demographer, said in a recent interview that economics is probably "the main trigger" attracting Northern blacks to such cities. Additionally, he said, many appreciate a sense of "cultural familiarity" from living in a region where many blacks can trace their roots.

The Robinsons, both originally from Pittsburgh and married 36 years, had lived in Penn Hills for three decades before looking to relocate in retirement. Jim had visited Atlanta frequently on business and taken the family there on vacations. They had friends from Pittsburgh who had already moved there. Their kids were grown and parents were deceased. The weather there is warmer.

The decision to move to the unofficial black capital of America — one of every three residents of greater Atlanta is African-American, instead of one of 12 in Pittsburgh — was thus a no-brainer last June. They're in a newly constructed home in the Atlanta suburb of Jonesboro.

One example of the cultural difference: The jazz buffs enjoy year-round access to live performances of the music they prefer, which they say was more of just a summertime thing in Pittsburgh.


"It's a culture shock to come here and go to market or any public place and be in the majority rather than minority, rather than going to somewhere like the Galleria [in Mt. Lebanon] where it's possible I might be the only person who looks like me," Cathy said. "Down here it's quite the opposite."

Gary Rotstein: grotstein@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1255.

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Reading

[Map: Pittsburgh African-American history](#)

[Nearly 90 sites of local, regional and national significance are represented in this guide of black history in Southwestern Pennsylvania.](#)

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[A life on the Hill](#)

[Sala Udin's story is a reflection of the hopes, dreams, fears and frustrations of an often invisible and unheard population.](#)

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C Ware 1 day ago

I also migrated to the south. After graduating from Allegheny High School on the Northside in 1976, I served in the US Army on active duty in Germany for 3 years. Upon returning to Pittsburgh there were no (viable) jobs to be had. I attended Triangle School of Technology and received my Associates Degree in Mechanical Design and job opportunities were still bleak. Having graduated at the top of my class, I approached Engineering firms in the city and offered to work a day with no pay so they could see that I had the applicable skills that were required for the job. Much to my surprise, I was denied on several occasions and it was at that point I realized that if I was going to be successful in life (as a young black male) I had to leave Pittsburgh.

In October of 1983 I had an opportunity to work at a Nuclear Plant in South Carolina, in which I gladly accepted. It was a totally different world when I moved down south. Eventually in October 1984 I settled in North Carolina, bought my first home in 1985 and have been here ever since. I continued on to obtain my Bachelors and Master's Degree, with the abundance of Colleges and Universities in any given area (to include several HBCU's). I must say that I do hold Pittsburgh dear to my heart and I am a "HUGE" Steeler fan. However, even though I still have family in Pittsburgh I know that I will never return there to live. Several members of my family have also moved down south as well and are enjoying a much better way of life while purchasing nice homes and enjoying the rich diversity that so many of the areas offer. Visiting Pittsburgh is an awesome experience (because I know the city) however there are not many

things in place to ensure that the black people in southwest Pennsylvania thrive as the city thrives.

When I was asked previously "how would you compare the south to Pittsburgh"? My answer was simple. I said "it is like taking a salt and pepper shaker and shaking them on a table together". Although everything is not perfect with the south, it appears that much more has changed here since the 1960's than has in the Steel City for people of color.

[🔗](#)

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+1 ☐



Jake Surtes 1 day ago

Gut Reise!

[🔗](#)

Reply

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anitra bolton 2 days ago

I am one of those former residents who migrated South and have absolutely no plans on returning to live only to visit family and friends. I have always said that Pittsburgh is not a city for African Americans trying to progress. There are too many variables stacked against us and not to mention within our community the "crabs in a barrel" syndrome is horrid.

[🔗](#)

Reply

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Jake Hamel 3 days ago

This quote from the article is SAD...."Washington makes sense for Mr. Stone and others as a relatively close, diverse area with virtually recession-proof economy due to the federal government" The federal government should never be recession-proof. Government dole takers espouse that they serve the citizens they represent. Sadly it is the opposite; government employees just take and take and take feeding from a recession-proof trough. BTW, that trough is \$20 trillion in debt. Consider reparations as paid in full.

[🔗](#)

Reply

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X K 3 days ago

So what we've got here are basically the leftovers - makes sense. It's too bad the underclass we have didn't leave instead, it would be a lot more attractive for the people who moved to stay or come back. It would be fantastic if we could do something to keep the middle and upper middle class of all races in Pittsburgh, instead we coddle the poor, so you end up with what we have now.

[🔗](#)

Reply

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michael jones 3 days ago

AMEN! AMEN! AMEN! I'M A CREOLE/NATIVE AMERICAN FROM THE GULFCOAST WHO CAME HERE AND PLAN ON MOVING BACK IN TIME TO THAT AREA WHERE PEOPLE OF COLOR AND BLACK COMMUNITY IS SO MUCH MORE BETTER OFF THEN HERE IN PITTSBURGH. YOU SEE SO MANY PEOPLE FROM AROUND THE WORLD IN THE GULF COAST AND IN PLACES LIKE ATLANTA,MIAMI, NEW ORLEANS, ALABAMA,CAROLINAS,DALLAS, AND DC IS ANOTHER PLACE GOOD FOR MINORITIES TO PROSPER WITHOUT THE WHITE COMMUNITY LOOKING AT YOU LIKE YOUR GARBAGE OR YOU DON'T HAVE ANY EDUCATION, OR CLASS,ETC. LIKE YOU GET IN PITTSBURGH ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU GO TO SOME OF THESE MOSTLY WHITE MIDDLE TO UPPER CLASS AREAS HERE. ITS SAD THE WAY THEY THINK. CLOSE MINDED AND IGNORANT, YOU DON'T SEE WEALTHY BLACK AREAS HERE, OR LOTS OF BLACKS HERE WITH DEGREES , OR BLACK DOCTORS, LAWYERS, LOTS OF BLACK BUSINESSES, BLACK PROFESSIONAL MEN

IN SUITS ONLY A FEW PROFESSIONAL BLACK WOMEN HERE,NO BEAUTIFUL BLACK OWN CLUBS AND RESTAURANTS,IF SO YOU CAN COUNT THEM ON ONE HAND ,NOT LIVING IN 200,000 - 1 MILLION DOLLAR HOMES WITH NICE CARS AND THE LIST GOES ON HERE IN PITTSBURGH. ITS SUCH A CULTURE SHOCK FOR SOMEONE FROM THE SOUTH . ITS A SHOCK FOR A LOT OF THE WHITE COMMUNITY HERE, WHERE DOWN SOUTH ITS NOT A BIG DEAL FOR WHITES TO SEE UPPER MIDDLE CLASS BLACKS AND MINORITIES , I SEE MORE GHETTO BLACKS HERE , NOT LIVING WELL, HARDLY ANY DEGREES, NO EXPENSIVE HOMES ,ETC. YOU DON'T HAVE WEALTHY BLACK UNIVERSITIES HERE, AND THE LIST GOES ON. SO YES! FOR THE BLACKS AND PEOPLE OF COLOR WHO WANT TO IMPROVE THERE LIFE WITHOUT BEING LOOKED AT LIKE THEY DID IN THE 50'S, THEN GET OUT OF PITTSBURGH AND GO SOUTH OR OUT WEST LIKE THE WEST COAST. YOUR MUCH BETTER OFF THEN HERE. .AND SOME OF YOU REDNECK PITTSBURGHERS, DON'T TRY TO PUT DOWN ATLANTA AND SOME OF THE OTHER SOUTHERN CITIES ETC. ATLANTA IS YEARS AHEAD OF YOU AND HAVE BEEN FOR A LONG TIME. WHAT YOU DID HERE IN 30 OR MORE YEARS THEY DID LESS THEN 20YRS. ... GO FIGURE?. NOW CHARLOTTE ,N.C. IS DOING THE SAME THING. PLACES LIKE ALABAMA, DALLAS, MIAMI, NEW ORLEANS, NASHVILLE, AUSTIN, TX. OR LOS ANGELES, THE CAROLINAS AND YES, DC IS WHERE BLACK PITTSBURGHERS NEED TO CHECK OUT.

[🔗](#)

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[2 replies](#)

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Jake Hamel 3 days ago

Mike, The main stream media states that the south is a bastion of white racism and blacks still are shunned. The white racists in the south are responsible for electing Trump. You are contradicting that narrative. Thank you for telling the truth and for shedding light on the open mindedness of all peoples that inhabit the southern USA, which includes the largest group of folks there; European Americans.

[🔗](#)

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John Bradshaw 3 days ago

Don't let the door hit you on the way out!

[🔗](#)

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Andrew Belsick 4 days ago

Yinzerdom at its finest.

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Fran Bertonaschi 4 days ago

Why, exactly, would anyone say that about Atlanta?

[🔗](#)

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