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FROM 1790 TO 1960

NEGROES IN NEW YORK

BY FLORENCE M. CROMIEN



THE CITY OF NEW YORK COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

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Research Report Number 4

**NEGROES IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK: THEIR NUMBER
AND PROPORTION IN RELATION TO THE TOTAL
POPULATION, 1790-1960**



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**Negroes in the City of New York: Their Number and Proportion
In Relation to the Total Population, 1790-1960**

FLORENCE M. CROMIEN

According to the most recent census of population, more than a million Negroes now live in the City of New York. They represent the largest concentration of Negroes in one community in American history. Nevertheless, they account for only 14 per cent of the total population of the City, a proportion that is exceeded in six other northern cities which are numbered among the twenty-five largest cities in the United States; namely, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh. In contrast, only fifty years ago no major American city outside the South had a Negro population as large as 10 per cent of its total population. Even New York, where Negroes were more numerous than in any city except Washington, had a Negro population in 1910 amounting to less than 2 per cent of the total population.

Clearly, neither absolute numbers alone nor proportions alone adequately suggest the size and influence of the Negro element in the population of any city, and this is especially true of New York where the vast influx of immigrants from Europe has tended at times to obscure the growth of the Negro community. Together, however, number and proportion provide a meaningful dimension. Therefore this brief historical report presents the pattern of growth of the Negro population relative to that of the total population of the City of New York at each ten-year interval since the first official census of 1790. (See Appendix Tables 1, 2, and 3.)

The significance of the growth of the Negro population of the City of New York and of the ratio of Negroes to whites at any given time must, like the growth of the population as a whole, be viewed in the light of the size of the area included within the city limits. For the first 225 years of its history the City of New York did not extend beyond Manhattan Island, except for a handful of small islands in the harbor. (For size and "color" distribution of the population of these islands, see Table 1, footnote 3.) The first territorial expansion of the City beyond Manhattan took place in 1874 with the annexation of Morrisania, West Farms, and Kingsbridge, towns lying across the Harlem River in the adjacent county of Westchester. In the censuses of 1880 and 1890, therefore, these Bronx communities and Manhattan together constituted New York County, which then was coextensive with the City. The second expansion took place in 1895 when the additional Westchester County towns of Westchester, East

Chester, Pelham, and Wakefield were annexed, thus rounding out the area known later as the Borough of the Bronx. Finally, on January 1, 1898, the boroughs of Brooklyn, Queens, and Richmond were created and combined with the boroughs of Manhattan and the Bronx to form Greater New York. The Borough of Brooklyn retained the boundaries of Kings County, and the Borough of Richmond (better known as Staten Island) retained the boundaries of the county of that name. The new Borough of Queens, however, was carved from only a portion of the original Queens County, the remainder being reconstructed as the new county of Nassau. In short, between 1873 and 1898 the City of New York grew in size from approximately 22 square miles (the area of Manhattan) to 64 square miles (Manhattan and the Bronx) and eventually to 319 square miles (the total area of the five boroughs).

In the first official population census authorized by the young republic in 1790 white and "colored" inhabitants were counted separately, a precedent that was followed in each successive census. Skin color, in fact, is the only distinguishing characteristic of the population that has been recorded consistently in every decennial census. In general the decision as to who should be included in the colored category has rested with the judgment of the individual census taker, and he has accepted local opinion or relied on personal observation without regard to scientific definition. The great majority of individuals so counted have been Negroes, or, in the census phrase, "persons of African descent." In some censuses, as in that of 1890, an attempt was made to differentiate "Blacks," "Mulattoes," "Quadroons," and "Octoroons." Before 1830 the enumerators counted separately the so-called colored persons who were "slave" and "free" (or simply "other free"). In 1827 slavery was outlawed in New York State, and thereafter "free colored" became the standard terminology used to describe the local Negroes. So-called civilized Indians, a term used to describe American Indians living among white persons and not on reservations or in tribal groups, were counted definitely among the colored population for the first time in the census of 1860. How they had been classified in previous censuses remains in doubt. For many years Negroes and American Indians together with a few Chinese constituted the entire non-white population of the United States.

It is not recorded how many, if any, of the approximately 800 inhabitants of the newly incorporated City of New Amsterdam in 1653 were Negroes, but it is known that Negro servants were not uncommon in the Dutch colony, and that a few miles distant, in the town of Breuckelen, there lived Negro free men who were property owners. About 125 years later, it has been reported, the City lost a substantial number of its Negro residents when Tory families fled with

~~their slaves during the American Revolutionary War, but free colored newcomers soon replaced them.~~ At the time of the first census in 1790, when the City occupied only the land between the Battery and the southern end of City Hall Park in Manhattan, roughly one in every ten New Yorkers was a Negro. (See Table 1 for population data from 1790 through 1890.) In neighboring Kings County and Richmond County the ratios were even higher: in Kings, almost one in three; in Richmond, almost one in four.

The Negro population of New York remained at the considerable proportion of approximately 10 per cent through the next two decades. After 1810 the proportion steadily decreased while at the same time the actual number of Negroes increased (though irregularly and slowly) until, in 1870, Negroes accounted for barely more than 1 per cent of a total population of more than 900,000. Not for another 50 years—or 1920—did Negroes again register more than 2 per cent of the population. And not until the special census of 1957 did the proportion again reach and surpass the 10 per cent that had been recorded back in 1790. (See Table 2 for the population of the City of New York and the Negro population and proportion in each borough from 1900 to 1960.)

New York always has attracted out-of-towners, and Negroes have been attracted to it much like other people. They have been drawn to the City in numbers far surpassing the number attributable to natural increase from births among Negroes already resident there. (Oscar Handlin points out in **The New-comers** that there were fewer born-New Yorkers among the Negro residents in 1960 than there had been in 1820.) They came at first from other northern communities and the Border States, and later from the Deep South. Sociologists have suggested that the legislation curtailing immigration in the early 1920's gave impetus to the movement of Negroes out of the South and into the large northern cities such as New York by opening up to them for the first time employment opportunities formerly preempted by white workers from Europe. In any year all but a small percentage of Negro New Yorkers have been American-born, but at times, especially after 1900, immigration from the West Indies and other countries in the Caribbean area have contributed a foreign-born element to the Negro community. Although the number of Negroes in New York increased sevenfold between 1790 and 1890, in the latter year the population of the city as a whole, swollen by immigrants from Europe, was almost 46 times the 1790 total. The greatest increase in the Negro population, on the other hand, has taken place in the twentieth century, since 1900 out-pacing the rate of growth of the white population.

Beginning in 1900, the first year in which the City of New York included the five boroughs, the proportion of Negroes to the total population rose in each successive decennial census. The absolute number also increased at each stage, growing almost 18-fold in 60 years. Meanwhile, the white population fell short of doubling itself. Unlike the white population—and the total population—the Negro population in the City as a whole did not show a decrease even in the special census of 1957.

Although the 1900-1960 population pattern differed in each of the five boroughs, by 1960 the number of Negro residents had multiplied in every borough, ranging from 9 times in Richmond to 69 times in the Bronx. In Manhattan, where more Negroes lived in 1900 and in each succeeding decade than in any other borough, the 1960 Negro population was 11 times that of 1900. Brooklyn and Queens in 1960 had 20 and 56 times as many Negroes as in 1900.

The proportion of Negroes in the total population of Manhattan climbed steadily from under 2 per cent in 1900 to 23 per cent in 1960. Only the special census of 1957 revealed a slight decrease in the absolute number of Negroes, and this loss was more than recouped in 1960. The white population followed a reverse trend. Largest in 1910, it diminished in each successive census thereafter.

In Brooklyn the Negro population increased substantially every ten years. At the same time, the white population rose so sharply between 1900 and 1910 that the Negro proportion in 1910 was actually smaller than it had been ten years earlier. Like Manhattan, Brooklyn showed a decrease in white population in 1957, but unlike Manhattan, Brooklyn had a renewed increase of white residents in 1960, though not enough to equal the 1950 total.

The number of Negroes in the Bronx increased uninterruptedly from 1900 to 1960, but the proportion of Negroes in the total population was more irregular. The greatest growth showed up in the 1950 census and thereafter.

Until 1930 Negroes in Queens were few in number, but thereafter they registered large increases. A concomitant increase in the white population, however, held the proportion down. In 1960 only Richmond had fewer Negroes and a smaller proportion of Negroes in relation to total population.

Richmond, least populous of the five boroughs, has shared the common New York experience of a steadily growing number of Negro residents, but the gain,

side by side with that of an expanding white population, has been less than 3 per cent in 60 years.

The percentage distribution of the total Negro population of the City among the five boroughs over the past 60 years is shown in Table 3. The outstanding trend revealed in this table is the steady reduction in the concentration of Negroes in Manhattan since 1920 and the dispersion of the Negro population into the other boroughs.

In recent years the population around the edges of the political entity known as the City of New York has grown in density until in 1960 the City proper had become merely the core of a much larger urban community. In this region, known as Metropolitan New York, Negroes constituted only 11.5 per cent of the total population instead of 14 per cent as in the City proper. Contrary to popular belief, however, analysis of recent census figures reveals that the nation-wide movement to the suburbs bears little apparent relationship to the racial composition of the cities. It has been pointed out, for example, that Minneapolis shared the trend to suburbia in 1950-60 even though that city had few Negro residents. Not race but economic status, according to the Director of the Census, as quoted in the press, is the determinative factor. He is said to have made the point that low-income Negroes, like low-income white immigrants before them, tend to cluster in the center of cities.

A recent report by the New York State Commission Against Discrimination¹ (**Populations of New York State: 1960, Report No. 1**) suggests that Negroes, too, are beginning to move out of the great urban centers. It notes that counties in the State outside the City of New York experienced a sharp increase in non-white population in 1950-60, and that many of the smaller cities registered a considerable Negro population for the first time in their history. If this pattern holds true in other States also, then the era of heavy concentration of Negroes in the largest cities, a condition that has characterized the American scene in recent years, may have passed its peak. This dispersal suggests, too, that an accelerating pattern of *de facto* desegregation may be under way; at the least it suggests that as the Negro minority spreads itself more thinly among the white majority of the nation, social desegregation may be facilitated.

¹Since March 20, 1962, the State Commission for Human Rights (SCHR).

APPENDIX

Table 1

Number and Proportion of Negroes
In the City of New York, 1790-1890 ¹

Census Year	Total Population	Negroes	
		Number	Percent
1890	1,515,301	23,601	1.55
1880 ²	1,206,299	19,663	1.63
1870	942,292	13,072	1.38
1860 ³	813,669	12,574	1.54
1850	515,547	13,815	2.67
1840	312,710	16,358	5.23
1830	202,589	13,976	6.89
1820	123,706	10,886	8.79
1810	96,373	9,823	10.19
1800	60,515	6,382	10.54
1790	33,131	3,470	10.47

¹ Based on data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

² Through the 1870 census, the City of New York comprised Manhattan and a handful of islands in the harbor. In 1874 the geographical boundaries of the city were extended to include part of the Bronx, formerly in Westchester County.

³ It is interesting to note that the 1860 enumerators counted 7,909 white inhabitants and 102 "free colored" inhabitants living on the six small islands in New York harbor.

Table 2

Number and Proportion of Negroes in the City of New York
and in Each of the Five Boroughs, 1900-1960 ¹

Census Year	Greater New York City		Negro Population in Each Borough										
	Total Population	Negro Population		Manhattan		Brooklyn		Bronx		Queens		Richmond	
		Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1960	7,781,984	1,087,981	13.97	379,101	23.38	371,405	14.18	168,896	11.50	145,855	8.06	9,674	4.35
1957	7,795,471	948,196	12.16	381,068	21.24	307,796	11.82	134,767	9.46	116,193	6.59	8,372	3.94
1950	7,891,957	747,608	9.47	884,482	19.61	208,478	7.61	97,752	6.73	51,524	3.82	5,372	2.30
1940	7,454,995	458,444	6.14	298,365	15.78	107,263	3.97	23,529	1.68	25,890	1.99	3,397	1.34
1930	6,930,446	327,706	4.72	224,670	12.03	68,921	2.69	12,930	1.02	18,609	1.72	2,576	1.62
1920	5,620,048	152,467	2.71	109,133	4.77	31,912	1.58	4,803	0.65	5,120	1.09	1,499	1.28
1910	4,766,883	91,709	1.92	60,534	2.59	22,708	1.38	4,117	0.95	3,198	1.12	1,152	1.34
1900	3,437,202	60,666	1.76	36,246	1.95	18,367	1.57	2,370	1.18	2,611	1.70	1,072	1.69
Increase, 1900-1960 (approx.)	2¼ times	18 times		11 times	20 times	69 times	56 times	9 times					

¹ Based on data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The census of 1900 included for the first time all the people living in the five boroughs of Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Richmond.

Table 3**Percentage Distribution of Negro Population of the City of New York
By Borough, 1900 - 1960 ¹**

	1960	1957	1950	1940	1930	1920	1910	1900
Total City-wide Negro Population	1,087,981	948,196	747,608	458,444	327,706	152,467	91,709	60,660
Manhattan	86.50%	40.19%	51.43%	65.08%	68.56%	71.58%	66.00%	59.75%
Brooklyn	84.14	82.46	27.89	23.40	21.03	20.93	24.76	30.27
Bronx	15.06	14.21	13.07	5.13	3.94	3.15	4.49	8.91
Queens	13.41	12.26	6.89	5.65	5.68	3.36	3.49	4.30
Richmond	0.89	0.88	0.72	0.74	0.79	0.98	1.26	1.77
Total — 100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

¹ Based on data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

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