

Rural African American Migration within the South 1910-1930

By Heidi Dodson as part of ICPSR Summer Program Course in Quantitative Historical Analysis

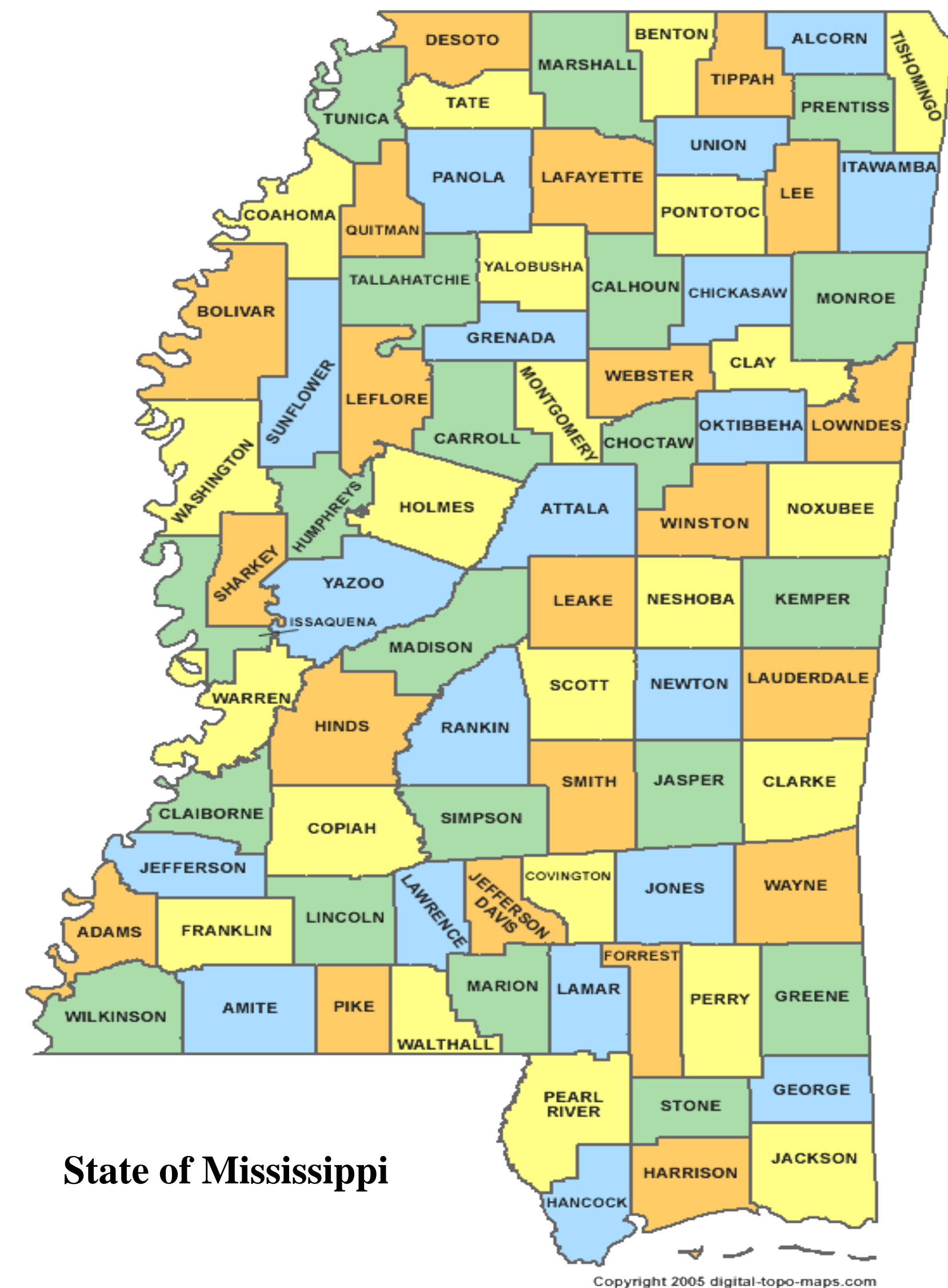
Key Findings

Cotton Acreage & African American Population

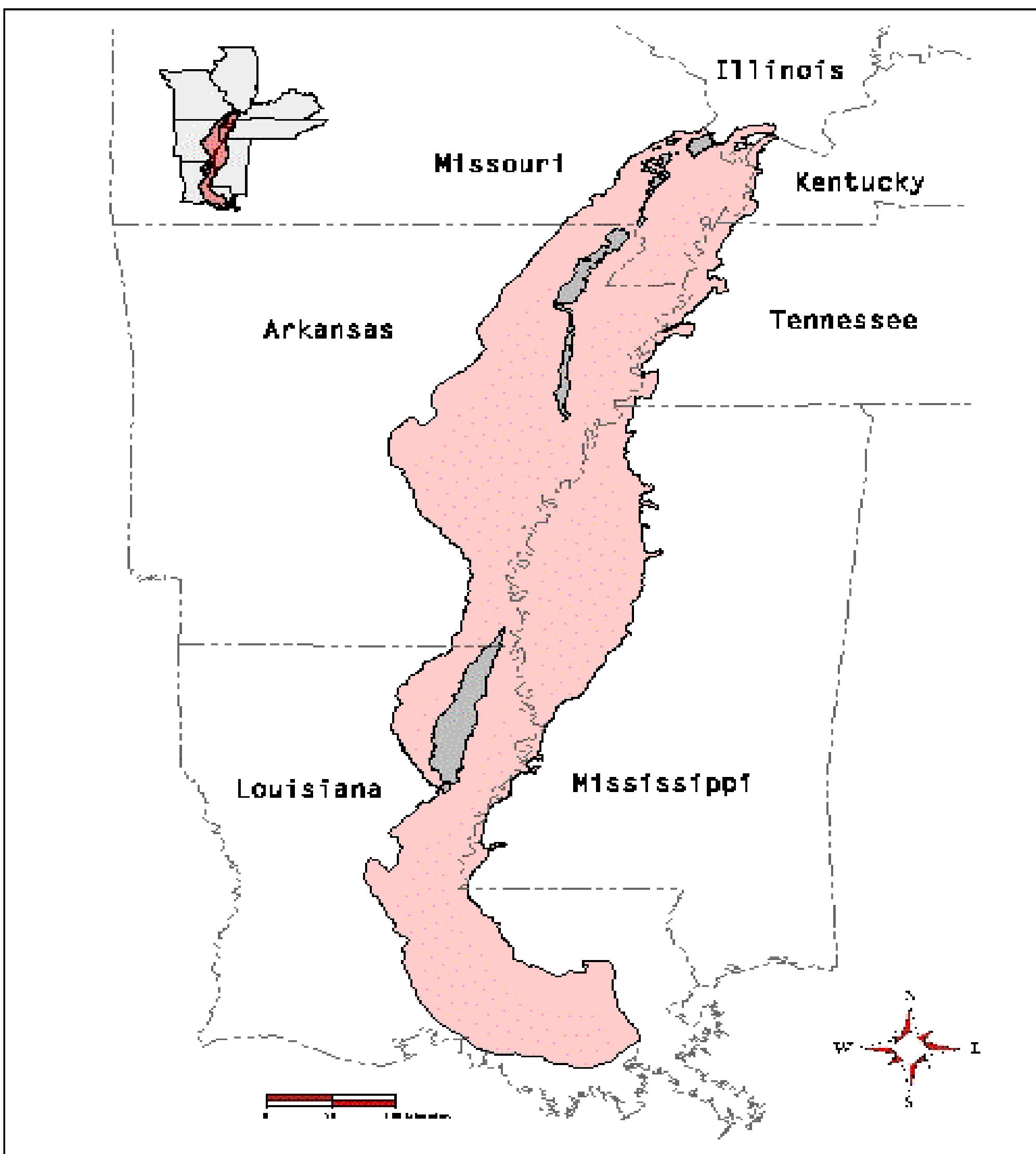
- Within Mississippi there is a strong positive relationship between the amount of cotton acreage and the African American population.
- This relationship weakened between 1920 and 1930.
- This relationship is stronger in the Delta counties which grow a higher percentage of cotton than most other counties

Direction & Origin of Rural Migration

- Male migrants who moved significant distances (further than the adjacent county) tended to move west, north, or northwest but rarely south.



State of Mississippi



Mississippi River Alluvial Plain

Abstract

Between World War I and the Great Depression there was a dramatic increase in African American migration to northern cities. This first phase of what has been called the Great Migration has received a great deal of scholarly attention because it was the beginning of the shift towards an increasingly urban African American population. The preponderance of attention paid to urban destinations overshadows the fact that most African Americans remained in the rural South until after World War II. Research by historians like Carole Marks has pointed to southern urban areas as the main place of origins for migrants taking part in the first phase of the Great Migration. The literature frequently refers to the depopulation of rural southern areas in states like Mississippi and Arkansas as a result of migration to both southern and northern cities. Yet little attention has been paid to the fact that some rural regions actually experienced an increase in population. This increase took place largely, although not exclusively, in the Mississippi Delta Region.

This project uses the ICPSR census data from 1910 to 1930, as well as county-level agricultural census data, and World War I Draft Registration Cards to examine this rural African American population movement. One hypothesis is that movement to the Delta regions in MS, AR, and MO were tied to the amount of cotton being grown and that counties with increases in cotton acreage presented economic opportunities. It is further hypothesized that African American rural migrants from Mississippi moved in a distinctly westward or northward pattern such as from eastern MS to the MS Delta, or from Mississippi to the Arkansas or Missouri Delta. Migration patterns usually result from a combination of factors such as economic opportunity, racial climate, and family demographics. The complexity requires both qualitative and quantitative analysis. This project begins to unravel this complexity by using quantitative methods.

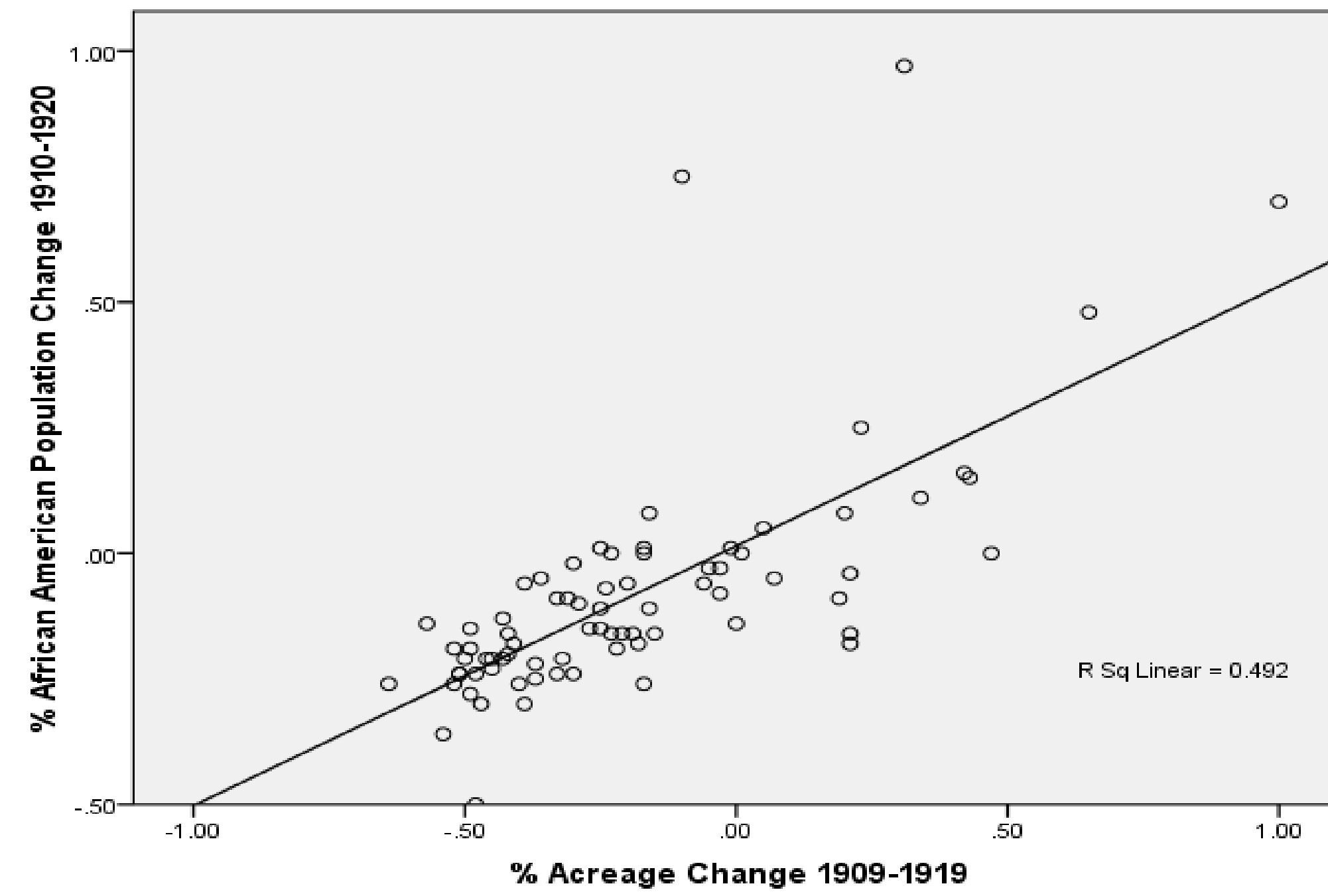
Methodology

In order to examine the relationship between rural migration and cotton acreage a simple linear regression was run for the variables of percent acreage change for each Mississippi county and percent African American population change. The regression was run for 1910-1920 and 1920-1930. This was repeated for the decade of 1910-1920 using only data for Mississippi Delta counties.

In order to better understand some of the characteristics of migration to the Delta, World War I Draft registration cards were sampled for Crittenden County Arkansas and Sunflower County Arkansas. Both were 100% rural counties at this time (1917-1918). The town of birth was recorded for both counties and subsequently the county of birth was determined. The hypothesis is that Mississippi migrants will be unwilling to move deeper into the South (MS Delta) despite increases in cotton acreage. Migrant county origins were coded as "north" or "west and south." Those coded "north" were counties lying north (even slightly) of Sunflower County. County origins for migrants to Crittenden County, Arkansas were coded the same way. The results for Crittenden County and Sunflower County were compared using crosstabulation and chi square.

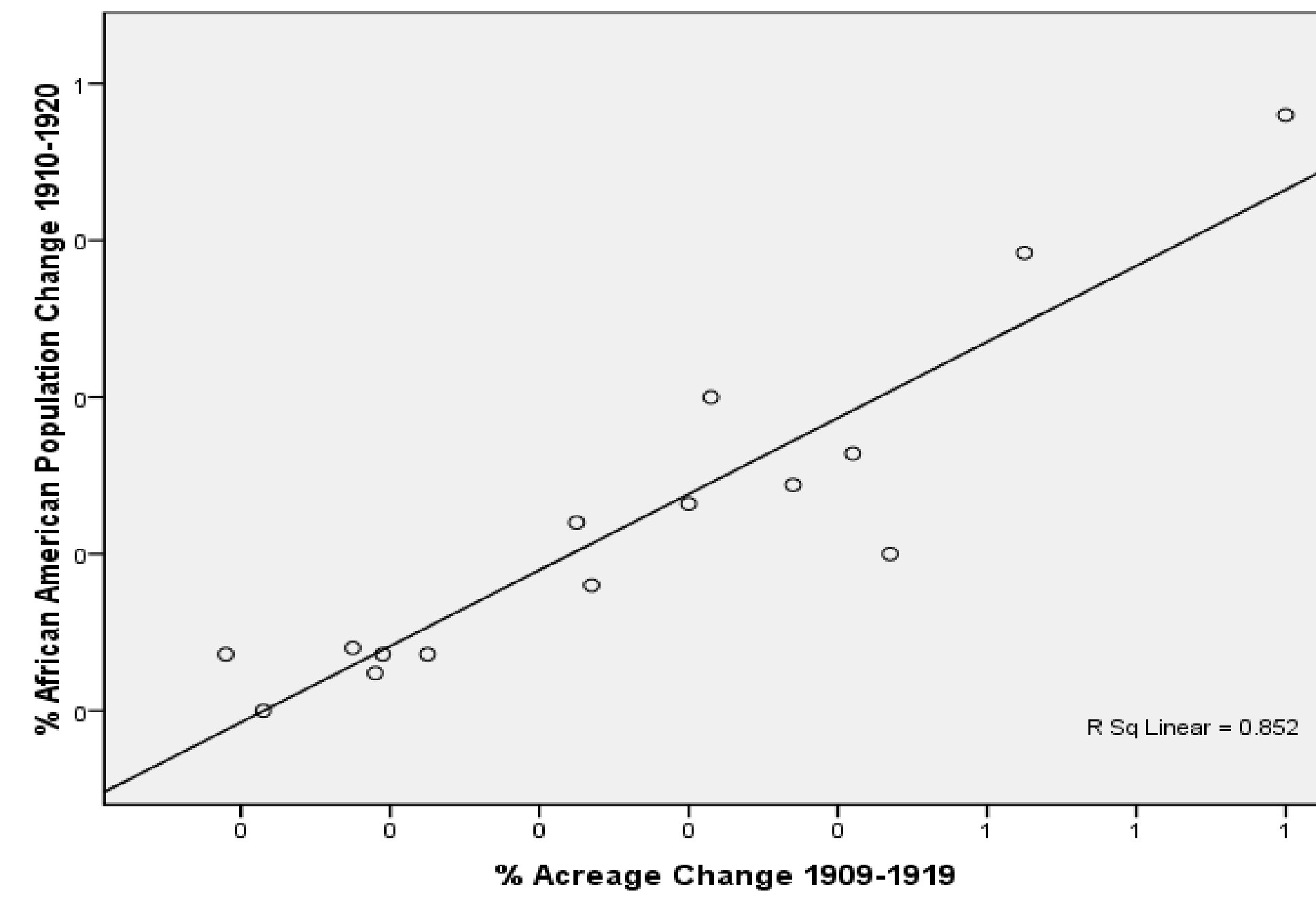
Cotton Acreage & African American Population

Relationship Between Cotton Acreage and African American Population for Mississippi Counties



R = .702 R Square = .492 Sig. = .000

Relationship Between Cotton Acreage and African American Population for Mississippi Delta Counties



R = .923 R Square = .852 Sig. = .000

Analysis

The graph on the left shows that when cotton acreage increased in a given particular Mississippi county between 1910 and 1920, there was usually a strong corresponding increase in the African American population. The graph on the right shows that this was particularly true in the Mississippi Delta counties. The data for 1919-1929 (graph not shown) also indicated a relationship, although it was weaker. The R value indicates the strength of these relationships. They are not surprising, but the analysis is useful for highlighting potential outliers and examining changing strength over time. For example, in the first graph Greene and Pearl River counties show a high population increase despite a respective decrease or minimal increase in cotton acreage. This indicates that factors are responsible for these population changes. Similarly, the weaker relationship in the decade between 1920 and 1930 may reflect the increase in urban economic opportunity for African Americans.

Directional Relationship Between Migrant Origin and Destination

Destination * Origin in Relation to Sunflower Co. Crosstabulation

		Origin in Relation to Sunflower Co.				
		South or West	North	Same	Total	
Destination	Crittenden Co AR	Count	216	366	1	583
	Expected Count	352.6	216.2	14.2	583.0	
Sunflower Co MS	Count	430	30	25	485	
	Expected Count	293.4	179.8	11.8	485.0	
Total	Count	646	396	26	1068	
	Expected Count	646.0	396.0	26.0	1068.0	

Sig. is .000

Analysis & Discussion

This table shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the observed and expected values of data regarding the origin of migrants who went to Crittenden County, Arkansas and those who went to Sunflower County, Mississippi. For example, assuming no difference between Crittenden and Sunflower County, one would expect 180 migrants from northern Mississippi counties to migrate to Sunflower County. However, only 30 showed up in the sample. Most migrants from counties north of Sunflower chose to travel north and west towards Arkansas rather than deeper into the South towards Sunflower County.

As mentioned above this assumes all other conditions are equal, which is rarely true. For example, distance between counties undoubtedly plays a role. Bolivar County, MS was designated as "north" but it is also adjacent to Sunflower County which probably explains why it contributed 11 of the 30 "north" migrants. Similarly, a large number of migrants to Crittenden County were from De Soto County, MS. This is probably because the distance is shorter than that between De Soto County and Sunflower County. However, out of 23 migrants in the sample from Chickasaw County, MS, none went to Sunflower County even though it was closer.

Future Research Directions

Because of the complexity of the migration process there are many other factors that can be explored both quantitatively and qualitatively.

For example, World War I draft registration data for other counties can be explored to confirm hypotheses or uncover new patterns. Different variables such as marital status, family dependents, employer, and town of birth can be analyzed. Comparisons can be made between migrants to rural and urban areas and patterns of chain migration or labor recruitment patterns could be discovered.

Analysis of other population and agricultural data may yield insights into patterns regarding variables like landownership, crop yield, and land value.

In addition to further quantitative analysis, qualitative research using memoirs, oral histories, newspapers, and organizational records can provide insight into decisions involved in rural migration.

Selected Sources

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U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1920, Agriculture

U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1930, Agriculture