

When the Levee Breaks: Black Migration and Economic Development in the American South
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ABSTRACT

In the American South, post-bellum economic stagnation has been partially attributed to white landowners' access to low-wage black labor; indeed, Southern economic convergence from 1940 to 1970 was associated with substantial black out-migration. This paper examines the impact of the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 on agricultural development. Flooded counties experienced an immediate and persistent out-migration of black population. Over time, landowners in flooded counties dramatically mechanized and modernized agricultural production relative to landowners in nearby similar non-flooded counties. Landowners resisted black out-migration, however, benefiting from the status quo system of labor-intensive agricultural production.

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