

The Scarlet E, Part II: 40 Acres

By: Brooke Gladstone (Host)

Adapted by Fishtank Staff

[Paragraphs 1–7 have been omitted. [Read or listen to the full podcast episode.](#)]

- 8 **BROOKE GLADSTONE:** The great northern migration is a major way station on the road to today's eviction crisis—and the interrelated racial wealth gap. The net worth of the typical black household is just 15 percent of the typical white one and the gap is growing. But the path to the present moment begins even earlier when European colonists built the nation's wealth on stolen land, with stolen labor and then fought over the continuance of slavery to sustain it. In fact, you could argue that the Emancipation induced a kind of mass eviction for African-Americans and it was into a most peculiar kind of freedom.

[CLIP]

- 9 **MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.:** In 1863 the Negro was freed from the bondage in physical slavery. But at the same time the nation refused to give him land, to make that freedom meaningful.

[END CLIP]

- 10 **BROOKE GLADSTONE:** As Martin Luther King often noted, the nation was keen to provide millions of acres out West to whites from Europe as a foundation on which to build their lives, but to the former slave it offered not a patch, not a stick.

[CLIP]

- 11 **MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.:** Frederick Douglass could say that emancipation for the Negro was freedom to hunger. Freedom through the winds and rains of heaven. Freedom without a roofs to cover their head. Freedom without bread to eat. Freedom without land to cultivate. It was freedom and famine at the same time. [END CLIP]

[MUSIC UP & UNDER]

- 12 **BROOKE GLADSTONE:** Beginnings can determine endings. The rate of white homeownership is almost 73 percent. But black homeownership languishes at about 43 percent. And that can be a deep disadvantage because if you don't own property, you can't transfer it to your kids. Only 13 percent of kids from college educated black families get an inheritance of more than ten thousand dollars as opposed to 41 percent of their white counterparts. Actually, white families average a lot more than that but ten thousand was deemed a transformative sum, one that could change the course of a life. So those who aren't bequeathed property deserve at least the chance to buy it wherever it is sold. For African-Americans it took another century plus five years

for that right. Even then the exclusionary policies of many banks and brokers and our laws ensured that only a few African-Americans would get a foothold in the housing market before prices zoomed into the stratosphere.

[MUSIC UP & UNDER]

- 13 **BROOKE GLADSTONE:** Which is why many argue that the wealth gap now is too large to seriously address without moving decisively to correct an old injustice.

[MUSIC UP & UNDER]

- 14 **BROOKE GLADSTONE:** In 1865, as the civil war wound down, President Lincoln ordered General William P. Sherman to come to terms with America's newly emancipated citizens. So he and the Secretary of War Edwin Stanton gathered a group of black ministers to ask what they wanted. Garrison Frazier. A Baptist minister who purchased his own freedom some years before, spoke for them all. Land, he said. To have it. Turn it. Till it. Would sustain them and even leave them something to spare. Sherman then issued an order allotting the newly emancipated a 30 mile tract held by former slave holders from South Carolina to Florida divided into 40 acre plots. And then he promised the Army's help in supplying mules. Tens of thousands of free people settled in. Then, we're driven out. Because President Andrew Johnson overturned the order.

[MUSIC UP & UNDER]

- 15 **BROOKE GLADSTONE:** Thus was that promise parcel in the American South recompense for centuries of barbarism clawed back. Even as slaveholders were compensated for the loss of their slaves. It took the agonies following reconstruction, the trampling of basic freedoms, the unbridled exploitation, the gleefully executed lynchings to spur the historic exodus of the incompletely emancipated north.

[MUSIC UP & UNDER]

[CLIP]

- 16 **ISABEL WILKERSON:** Six million African-Americans departed the caste system of the Jim Crow south from the time of World War I until the 1970s. [END CLIP]

- 17 **BROOKE GLADSTONE:** Isabel Wilkerson is the author of *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*.

[CLIP]

- 18 **ISABEL WILKERSON:** The only group of Americans who's had to actually leave the land of their birth for another part of their own country just to be recognized as a citizens to which they have been born.

[MUSIC UP & UNDER]

19 **ISABEL WILKERSON:** And it changed every single city in the north and Midwestern. And as it changed our culture, it changed the music that we listened to, it changed literature, it changed politics. [END CLIP]

[MUSIC UP & UNDER]

20 **BROOKE GLADSTONE:** When the great migration began, 90 percent of African-Americans lived in the south. When it was over, more than half were living elsewhere.

[MUSIC UP & UNDER]

21 **BROOKE GLADSTONE:** In 1916, the Chicago Defender, an African-American newspaper, beckoned their quote, 'southern brothers to come north.' Quote, 'better a thousand times to run chances of being nipped by the fingers of Jack Frost that to shake off this mortal coil at the end of a lyncher's rope.' The white perspective was displayed in a 1918 headline in The Chicago Tribune. Quote, 'Fearing Negro invasion crowd attacks House.' That chilly reception warmed only slightly by the need for cheap labor in the slaughterhouses and elsewhere underwent a hard freeze when the depression blasted in.

[MUSIC UP & UNDER]

22 **BROOKE GLADSTONE:** After the crash, black unemployment doubled or tripled that of whites—as the latter moved in to take the grueling jobs they'd previously shunned. In 1936, African-Americans finally deserted the party of Lincoln and voted for FDR. But though the New Deal appointed many African-American advisers, its programs were managed on the local level where racism thrived. FDR couldn't afford to lose Southern Democrats so his administration overlooked the Jim Crow laws and the monstrosity of lynching. But it was worse than that. Southern congressmen demanded that agricultural and domestic workers, guess who held most of those jobs, be barred from the shiny new programs like Social Security and the minimum wage. Black veterans were denied the educational benefits and low cost loans whites enjoyed under the G.I. Bill. In these and many ways, blacks were denied the helping hand extended freely to whites in pursuit of the American dream.

[CLIP]

23 **MALE CORRESPONDENT:** Homeownership is the basis of a happy contented family life. And now, through the use of a National Housing Act, insured mortgage is brought within the reach of all citizens on a monthly payment plan no greater than rent.

24 **FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT:** I see one-third of the nation ill-housed, ill-clad and ill-nourished.

25 **MARTY WEGBREIT:** What did they need? Houses. Who had the money to loan to developers? Banks. Who would insure the banks? The Federal Housing Administration. And the Federal Housing Administration had one tiny little condition—don't sell to black people. [END CLIP]

26 **BROOKE GLADSTONE:** Marty Wegbreit is the director of litigation for the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society.

[CLIP]

27 **MARTY WEGBREIT:** It wasn't just the south. It wasn't just the Northeast. It was Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Dallas, Atlanta, Miami—every place across the entire country. That's how the country got segregated. Moreover, what the government was doing as a policy was perfectly legal. And if you were denied rental, if you were denied home purchase until 1968 there was nothing you could do. Now 51 years ago that got changed but by then the pattern had set in. Homeownership for white people, rental for black people. And we're still living with that legacy today. [END CLIP]

[MUSIC UP & UNDER]

28 **BROOKE GLADSTONE:** With us, generation after generation were corralled into areas outlined on maps in red—legally designated as risky. These areas, disinvest in and underserved, were snapped up by speculators and then rented at above market rate to citizens fleeing the horrors of Jim Crow. It didn't really matter how much you earned, if you could have qualified for an FHA loan, if you were black, you wouldn't. With your options limited, your home most likely would be located within the red lines. A fitting color for a place engineered to bleed you dry. So there's no denying that when the nation was born its wealth was derived in large part from theft. That's the easy part. Now is the hard part. And where the denial of fair access to land, to housing, continues north, south, east and west. For half a million people on the Great Migration, Chicago was the last stop. So next we go to Chicago.

[MUSIC UP & UNDER]

29 **BROOKE GLADSTONE:** This is On The Media.

30 **BROOKE GLADSTONE:** This is On The Media, I'm Brooke Gladstone. And in this part of the hour I'm in the second city, the windy one. The one that works with big shoulders, Chi town, Chiraq. Chicago.

[MUSIC UP & UNDER] [CLIP]

31 **MALE CORRESPONDENT:** Chicagoans claim their skyline as one of the most beautiful in the world, Etched against the impressive clearness of Lake Michigan. Perhaps this is the scene that most catches the visitor's eye when it comes to the city for the first time. A picture of wealth and serenity.

[Paragraphs 32–112 have been omitted. [Read or listen to the full podcast episode.](#)]