AFRICAN-AMERICAN POPULATION OF DELAWARE:

1800 TO 1980

by

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Introduction

Delaware's population growth occurred in roughly three phases: from 1800 to 1840, from 1840 to approximately 1940, and from 1940 to 1980 (Figure 1). In 1800, Delaware's population was 64,273. African-Americans numbered 14,421 (22% of the state's total); 6,153 or 43% were slaves.

Over the next 140 years, the African-American population of the state grew modestly, increasing an average of 6% each decade until 1940 (Table 1 and Figure 2). Growing at a slower rate (4% per decade), the white population increased to 58,564 people by 1840. By 1840 the African-American proportion of the state's population had risen slightly to 25%. From 1840 to 1940, however, the white population, fueled primarily by growth in Wilmington, grew at a faster rate than did African-American population--15% per decade on the average (Figure 3). In 1940 the 19,251 African-Americans living in Delaware constituted 14% of the state's total population.

After 1940, both white and African-American populations in Delaware increased significantly. Between 1940 to 1960, the rate of growth among African-Americans was higher (28% per decade on average) than for whites (22%). While the number of both populations continued to increase between 1960 and 1980, however, the rates of growth per decade on average dropped to 26% for African-Americans and 13% for whites. By 1980, African-Americans numbered 95,845--16% of Delaware's total population of 583,662.

From 1800 to 1860, the number of slaves in Delaware declined from 6,153 to 1,798. Because during this same period the total African-American population increased from 14,421 to 21,627, the number of free African-Americans increased from 8,268 to 19,829. After 1820, the number in slavery dropped steadily decade by decade until the eve of the Civil War when they represented only 8% of Delaware's African-American population.

The basic elements of demographic change are natural increase (births and deaths) and migration. Population change is measured by the amount of change in both of these categories. A demographic analysis would look at both of these factors in depth. This paper describes the historical outlines of demographic change in the African-American population of

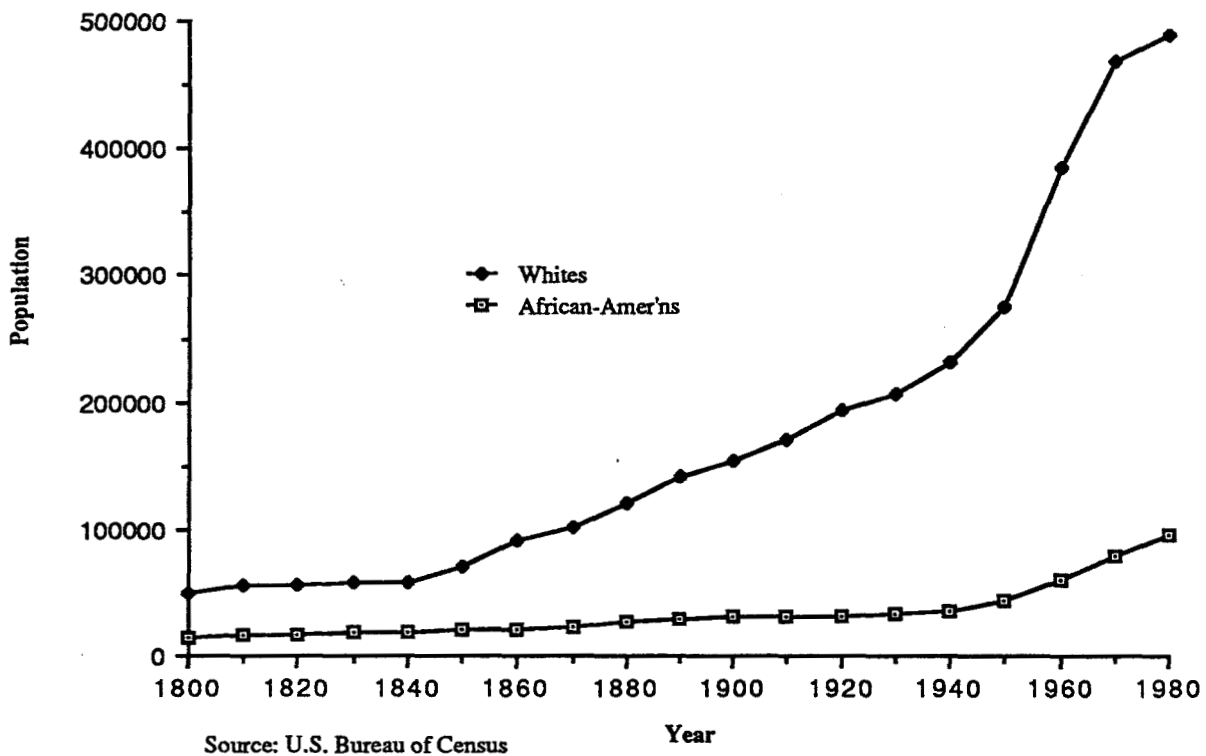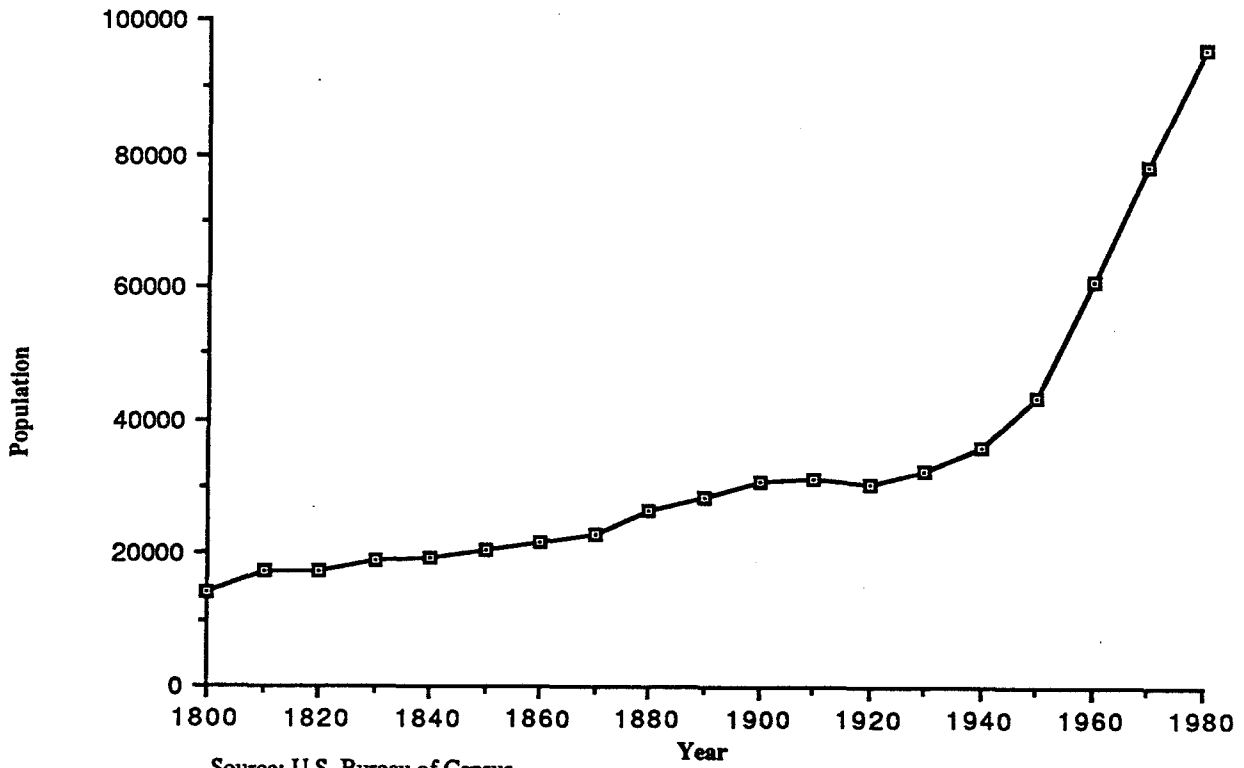# Figure 1: Population Growth in Delaware, 1800-1980

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census

Table 1: African-American Population in Delaware 1800-1980

Year	Wilmington	Suburban New Castle County	Kent County	Sussex County	Delaware
1800	*	4592	5731	4098	14421
1810	*	4966	6344	6003	17313
1820	*	5539	6603	5325	17467
1830	*	6494	6259	6394	19147
1840	1616	5698	6254	5956	19524
1850	2140	5875	6732	5616	20363
1860	2210	6232	7474	5711	21627
1870	3211	6972	7164	5438	22785
1880	5468	7168	8114	5692	26442
1890	7644	6721	8036	5985	28386
1900	9736	6461	7738	6762	30697
1910	9081	6601	7561	7938	31181
1920	10746	5579	6753	7257	30335
1930	12080	6391	6612	7519	32602
1940	14256	6190	6531	8899	35876
1950	17202	8537	6859	11000	43598
1960	24922	11117	9570	15079	60688
1970	35072	13797	12999	16408	78276
1980	35858	24258	17759	17970	95845

* Data for Wilmington were not separated from New Castle County data until 1840.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census

Figure 2: African-American Population Change in Delaware, 1800-1980

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census

After growing slowly for 140 years, the African-American population of Delaware increased rapidly after 1940.

Figure 3: Rate of Change for African-American Population in Delaware, 1800-1980

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census

Year span
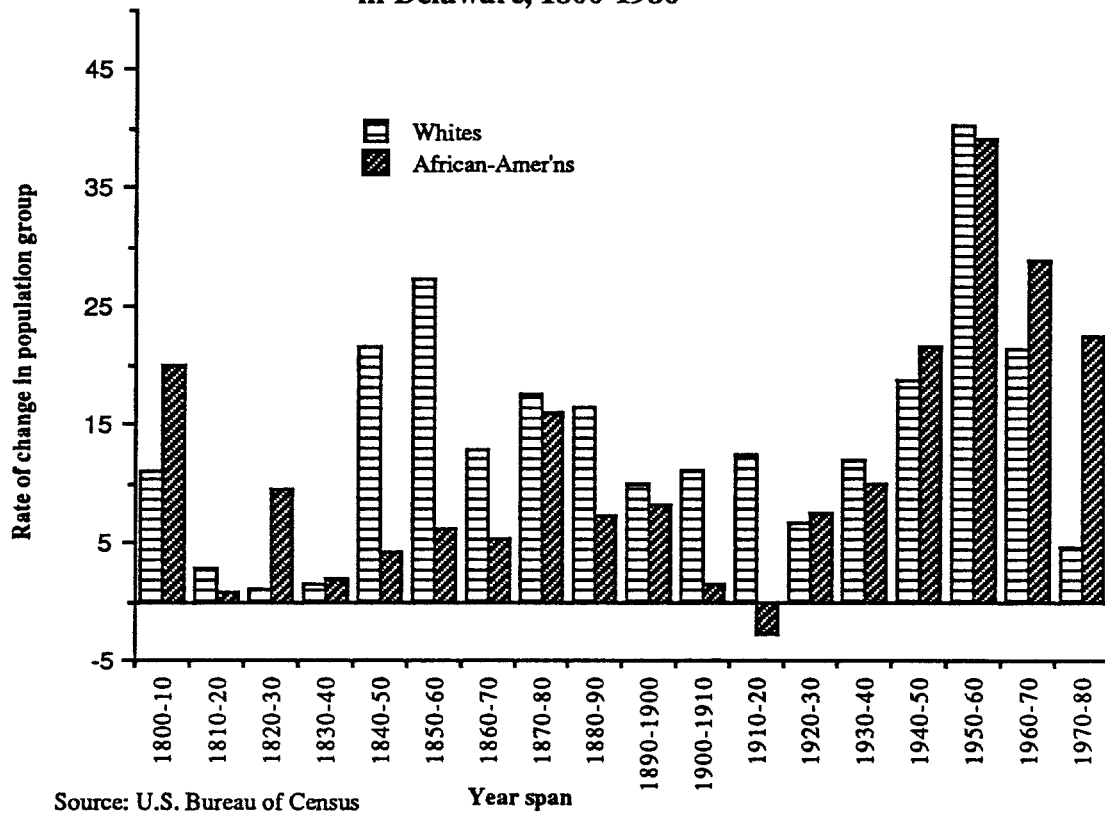
Delaware. Because population densities are also an important characteristic of a population, it is important to remember that Sussex County is nearly half of the land area of the state, while Wilmington is less than one percent. For example, in 1880 when the African-American populations of Sussex County and Wilmington were roughly equal--5,692 and 5,469 respectively--the density of African-Americans living in Sussex County was 6.0 people per square mile whereas that of Wilmington was 423.8 people per square mile.

### Statewide Changes in African-American Population

Important demographic differences begin to emerge between the African-American population in Wilmington and the in the rural remainder of the state after 1840. It is therefore important to distinguish between Wilmington and New Castle County outside of Wilmington (which is possible only after 1840) in addition to Kent and Sussex counties.

Geographic Shifts

In 1800 of Delaware's 14,421 African-Americans, 5,731 lived in Kent (40%), 4,592 in New Castle (32%) and 4,098 resided in Sussex (28%). By 1900, 53% of the African-American population (16,187) lived in New Castle County. Although the number of African-American residents in Kent County grew by 35% from 1800 to 1900, its share of the total number of African-American Delawareans declined from 40% to 25%. In Sussex, the African-American population increased 65% during the same period, while Sussex's proportion of the state's African-American dropped from 28% to 22%.

The growth of the African-American population in Wilmington accounted for this northward shift. In 1840, when the U.S. Census first published separate population figures for Wilmington, 1,616 African-Americans lived there--8% of Delaware's African-American population and 22% of New Castle County's African-Americans (Figure 4). Over the next 60 years, Wilmington's African-American population grew faster than any other area in the state, increasing by 502%. In one decade alone, 1870 to 1880, Wilmington's African-American population increased 70%. In comparison, in Delaware outside of Wilmington, the African-American population grew by

Figure 4: African-American Population Growth
in Wilmington and Delaware, 1840-1980

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census
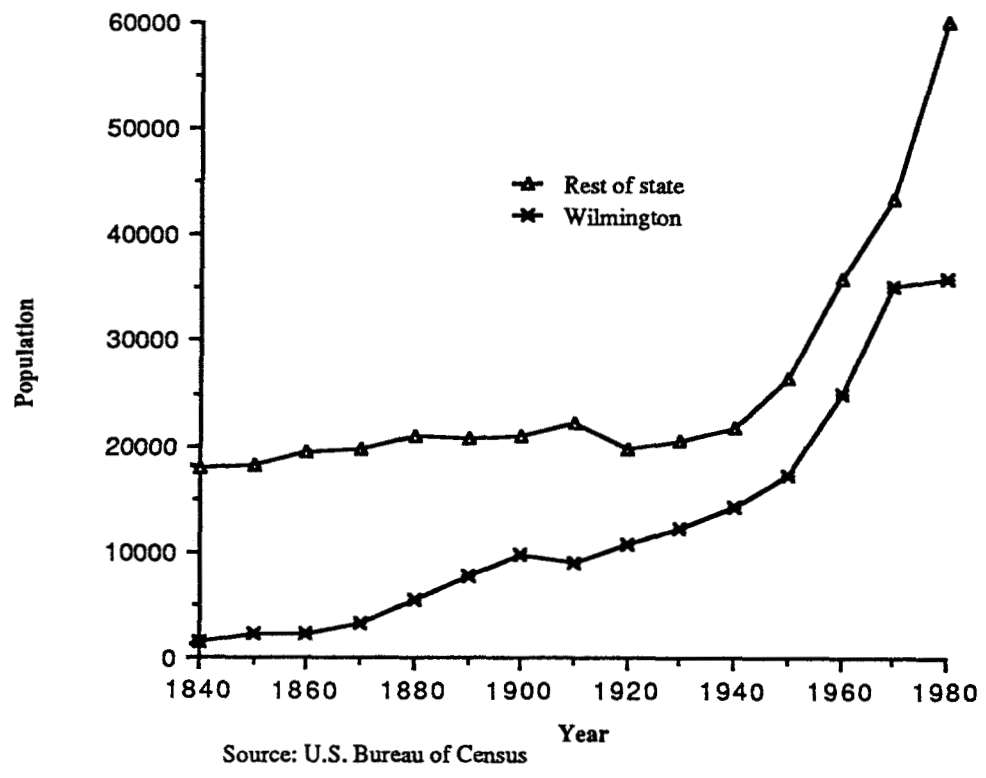
only 17% during this period. As a result, by 1900 nearly one-third of the state's African-American population lived in Wilmington.

New Castle County outside of Wilmington contributed little to the northward shift of the African-American population from 1840 to 1900. Mirroring the changes in the two southern counties, where from 1840 to 1900 the increase in the African-American population was 14% in Sussex and 24% in Kent, New Castle County's increased by 13% (Figure 5).

From 1900 to 1920, the overall growth of African-American population in Delaware came to a standstill--the population that stood at 30,697 in 1900 was some 300 less in 1920. The changes in the counties and city produced a very uneven demographic landscape for African-Americans (Figure 3).

From 1920 to 1940, the African-American population in Delaware grew 18%. The rate of growth between 1940 and 1960 was much higher (61%). By 1960 the African-American population of 60,688 was almost twice its 1920 total; two of every five African-American Delawareans lived in Wilmington. Of the remaining African-American population of Delaware, 25% lived in Sussex County, 18% in suburban New Castle County, and 16% in Kent County. The 39% growth rate during the 1950s was the highest in demographic history of African-Americans in Delaware and part of record overall population growth in the state. While the growth rate of the African-American population declined in the 1960s and 1970s, the population continued to increase, reaching 95,845 by 1980.

Migration and Natural Increase

The appearance of stability suggested by unchanging population totals between 1800 and 1930 can be misleading. For example, Harold Livesey says that between 1890 and 1910, Delaware had one of most mobile African-American populations in the country, noting that in 1910, 30% of all African-Americans born in Delaware had moved out. He also observed that Delaware did not attract African-Americans to move into the state; of the 31,000 African-Americans living in Delaware in 1910, 22,400 were born in Delaware and 5,400 came from Maryland (Livesey 1968, 116-117).

Looking more closely at data from 1860 to 1930 reveals that the

**Figure 5: African-American Population Growth
in Wilmington, Suburban New Castle County, Kent County,
and Sussex County, 1840-1980**

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census
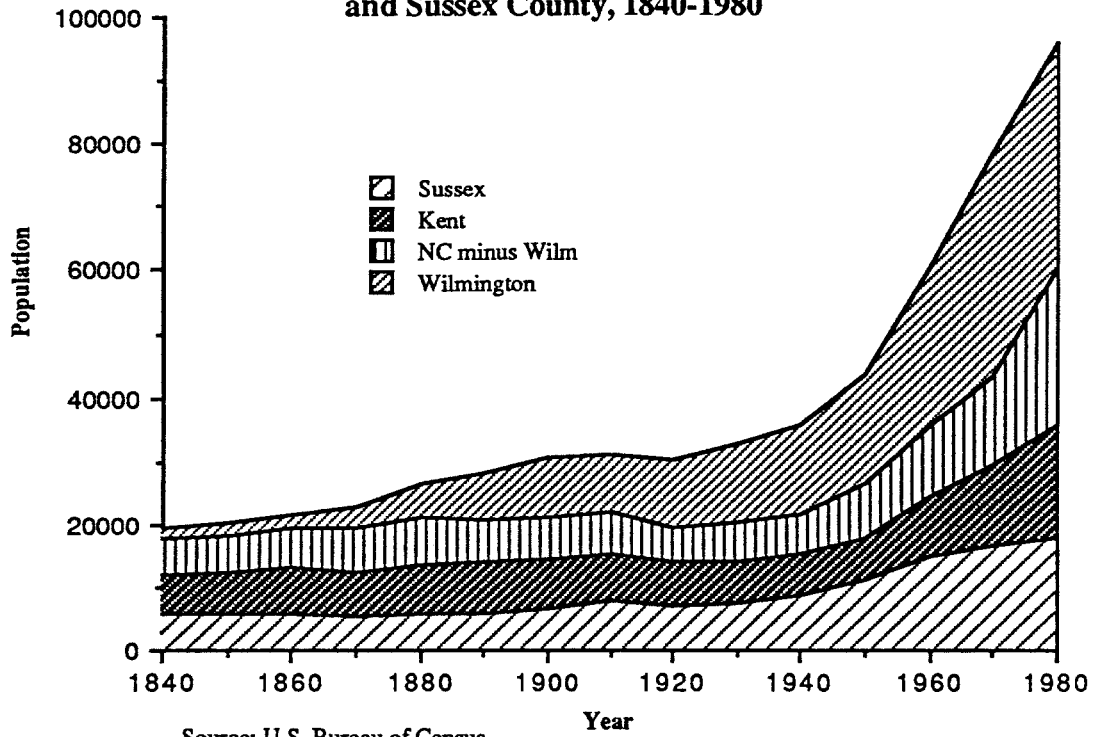
proportion of African-Americans born and living in Delaware declined from 75% in 1860 to 66% by 1930 (Table 2 and Figure 6). Out-migration of African-Americans increased steadily during this period; 25% of Delaware-born African-Americans were living outside the state in 1870 and 34% by 1930. Correspondingly, the number of in-migrants in the population increased from 11% in 1870 to 34% in 1930. The actual number of African-American in-migrants grew from 2,564 in 1870 to 11,171 in 1930. Overall, from 1860 to 1920, more African-Americans were leaving Delaware than moving in.

This means that during this period, the growth in the African-American population of Delaware was primarily through natural increase (more births than deaths). Although the majority of the African-Americans born in Delaware remained in the state, an increasing number and percentage choose to leave. Although in-migration also increased, the population trends in the counties and Wilmington suggest that most of the out-migration was from rural areas while most of the new-comers came to Wilmington.

The Counties and Wilmington

After 1840, the bulk of the African-American population growth was occurring in Wilmington. In 1840, the African-American population in Delaware outside of Wilmington numbered 17,908; by 1940, it had only increased to 21,620 (Figure 7). The average rate of growth per decade actually declined over several decades. Although the number of African-Americans in each county shifted over time, the ranking of the counties in African-American population density remained the same with Sussex County the lowest, rural New Castle the highest, and Kent County maintaining an intermediate density. In contrast, Wilmington's African-American population increased from one-fifth of the state's African-American population to more than one-half (from 1,616 in 1840 to 14,256 in 1940).

Sussex County

The African-American community in Sussex County was the smallest among the three counties in 1800, accounting for 28% of the total African-American population. In 1800, 4,098 African-Americans lived in Sussex

Table 2: In- and Out-Migration of African-Americans in Delaware 1870-1930

| Year	African-Amer'ns born in Delaware	African-Amer'ns born & living in Delaware		African-Amer'ns born in Delaware, living elsewhere		African-Amer'ns born elsewhere, living in Delaware	
	#	#	%	#	%	#	%
1870	26819	20214	75.4	6605	24.6	2564	11.3
1880	N/A	22686	N/A	N/A	N/A	3734	14.1
1890	30994	22426	72.4	8568	27.6	5936	20.9
1900	33071	23274	70.4	9797	29.6	7394	24.1
1910	32664	22668	69.4	9996	30.6	8401	26.9
1920	30919	20438	66.1	10481	33.9	9589	31.6
1930	32184	21311	66.2	10873	33.8	11171	34.3

* In the columns recording data for African-Americans born and living in Delaware and for African-Americans born in Delaware and living elsewhere, the percentage figure is the percent which that group represents of the total number of African-Americans born in the state. In the column recording data for African-Americans born elsewhere and living in Delaware, the percentage amount is the percent which that group represents of the total African-American population of the state.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census

Figure 6: In- and Out-Migration of African-Americans in Delaware, 1870-1930

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census
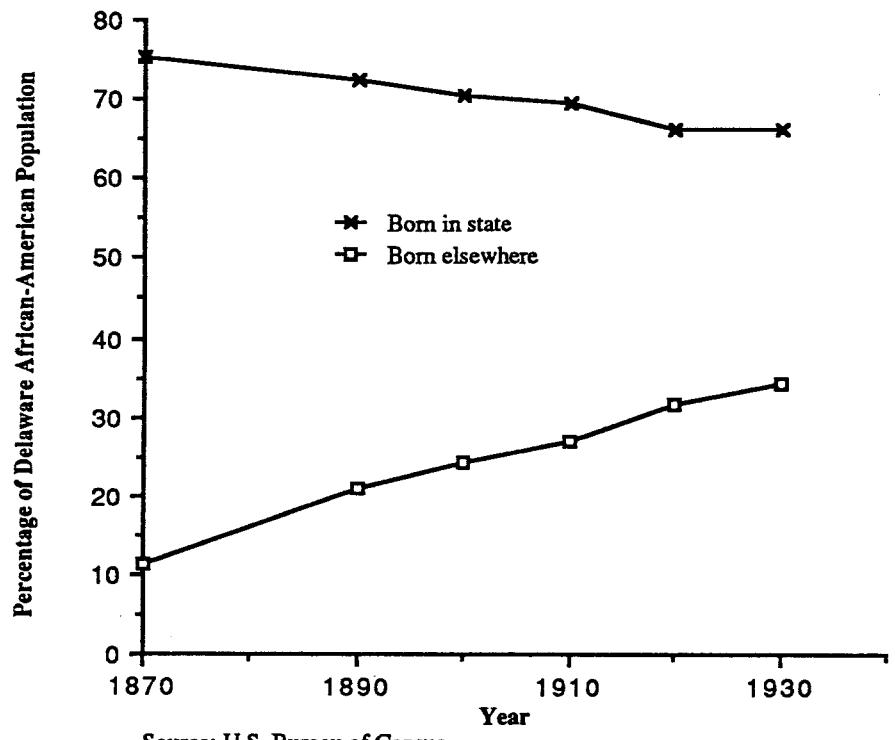
Figure 7: Growth of African-American Population in Kent and Sussex Counties, New Castle County outside of Wilmington, and the City of Wilmington 1800-1980

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census
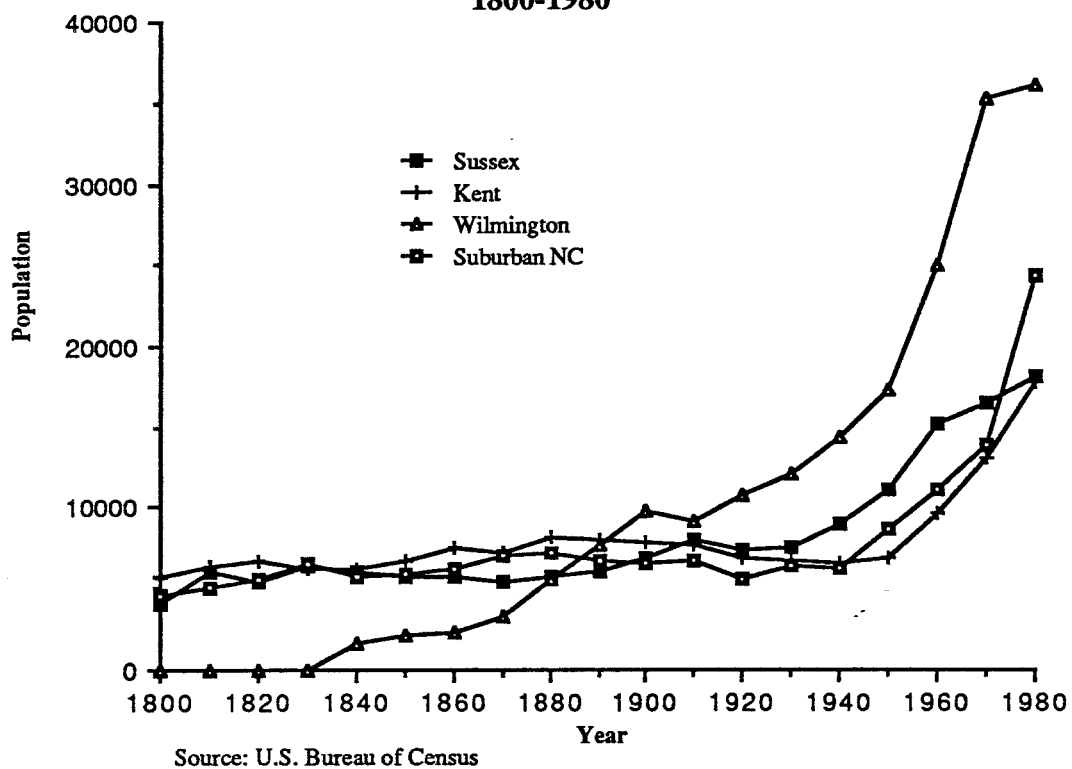
County, of whom 2,837 (69%) were slaves. Whereas the African-American population grew to 5,711 by 1860, the number of slaves dropped steadily each decade to only 1,341 (23%) by 1860. The settlement pattern of African-Americans in Sussex County was by far the most dispersed in the state at 4.3 persons per square mile. Even by 1910, when the African-American population of Sussex had grown to be the largest rural segment of African-Americans in the state, its population density remained the lowest. The African-American community in Sussex County remained the largest among the counties, outside of Wilmington, until 1980, when it fell to third.

Between 1810 and 1870, the African-American population in Sussex County fluctuated up and down each decade by only a few hundred persons, averaging about 6,000 persons. Then the number of African-Americans in Sussex began to grow steadily, increasing by 5% in the 1870s and peaking at 17% in the first decade of the twentieth century, when the actual population was 7,938.

After a loss of 11% between 1910 and 1920, the African-American population of Sussex grew slightly in the 1920s (4%) and then more rapidly through 1960, averaging 19%. In the 1960s and 1970s, the rate of increase in the African-American community of Sussex County declined to an average of 9%. In 1980 the African-American population of Sussex County numbered 17,970.

Kent County

Throughout the nineteenth century, except for the decade of the 1830s, the largest proportion of African-Americans in Delaware lived in Kent County. The African-American population in Kent was very stable in total numbers well into the twentieth century. In 1810, the number of African-Americans living in Kent County was 6,344; in 1950, African-Americans in Kent County numbered 6,859. By 1910 the African-American population of Kent County ranked third after Wilmington and Sussex County; after 1940, it contained the smallest African-American population.

In 1800, 1,485 of the African-American population of Kent County were slaves, the smallest number and percentage among the three counties. Consistent with the overall pattern in the state, the number of slaves

declined both absolutely and as a proportion of the total African-American population until 1860.

While the African-American population of Kent County grew slowly from 1800 to 1880, between 1880 and 1940, the population decreased by 20%. This decline suggests ongoing out-migration from the county, which is consistent with the statewide trend noted earlier. Rapid growth in the African-American population of Kent County did not begin until the 1950s, 30 years later than in Sussex County. After a century and a half of minimal population change, the African-American population of Kent County almost tripled from 1940 to 1980, reaching 17,759 in 1980.

New Castle County

In 1800, the African-American population of New Castle County numbered 4,592--32% of the African-Americans living in Delaware. Through 1830, when its African-American population was 6,494, New Castle County census figures include Wilmington; starting in 1840 the city was counted as a separate unit. Hence after 1830, "New Castle County" refers to the county outside of Wilmington.

From 1840 to 1900, the African-American population of New Castle County grew by 13%, from 5,698 to 6,461. It followed the same pattern of minor fluctuation in the midst of stability that characterized the two southern counties. Between 1900 and 1940, this fluctuation resulted in a 4% loss in population. Between 1940 and 1970, however, the growth rate of the African-American population in New Castle County increased to an average of 31% per decade. And in the 1970s, the population increased by a staggering 76%. Thus from 1940 to 1980, New Castle County's African-American population quadrupled, increasing from 6,190 in 1940 to 24,258 in 1980.

Wilmington

In 1840, when the U.S. Census started reporting Wilmington separately, the African-American population of Wilmington was 1,616, of whom almost all were free. After 1840, the African-American population in Wilmington grew at the fastest rate in the state until 1910--the year Wilmington, with a population of 9,736, became the largest African-American community in

Delaware.

Between 1910 and 1920, the African-American community lost 7% of its population. From 1920 to 1950, however, the African-American population in Wilmington grew an average of 18% a decade, establishing a population of 17,202 in 1950. In the 1950s and 1960s, the African-American residents of Wilmington experienced the highest growth rates of the century in Wilmington, increasing by an average of 43% per decade. By 1970 the number of African-Americans living in Wilmington was 35,072--nearly half of the total of African-American Delawareans. However, in the 1970s the rate declined to 2%, bringing the African-American population of Wilmington to 35,858 in 1980.

      *   *   *   *   *   *

Up to this point, we have been describing the demographic changes in the African-American population of Delaware and have not considered the influence of racial discrimination on these patterns. The differential growth of African-Americans in Wilmington and New Castle County, however, was heavily influenced by racial discrimination and economic segregation. To describe more completely and understand more fully the demographic history of Delaware's African-American population we must look at the dynamic of the total state population.

References

Harold C. Livesey. 1968. "Delaware Negroes, 1865-1915." *Delaware History* (October 1968).