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AMERICA ON THE MOVE**Upstate N.Y. leads charge to Charlotte region**

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On the shores of Lake Erie, the city of Buffalo and other communities have withered.

Two-thirds of cities and towns in upstate New York lost population this decade. Several games of the region's beloved Buffalo Bills were blacked out locally this season because of unfilled seats. The local Catholic diocese is closing schools and churches.

Since its 1950s high, Buffalo's population has declined by more than half, to around 280,000. Meanwhile, since 2000, Charlotte has added 46,000 residents.

And now, an Observer analysis of new data from the Internal Revenue Service shows a significant chunk of upstate New York's population has moved to the Charlotte region.

The information, using address changes on tax returns, paints a picture of the migration into and out of the Charlotte region. It shows that Mecklenburg County is the No. 1 out-of-state destination for people leaving Erie County, home of Buffalo. It's the No. 2 out-of-state destination from Monroe County, home to nearby Rochester.

The data also show strong migration from upstate New York to Union, Cabarrus, Iredell and York counties.

Most newcomers come from elsewhere in the Carolinas. Other areas with large numbers of people leaving for the Charlotte region: Miami, Los Angeles, Atlanta and Chicago.

U.S. Census Bureau data show New York is the No. 1 source of newcomers to the nine-county Charlotte region from outside the Carolinas. An estimated 13,000 people move here from the Empire State annually.

As a result, neighborhoods around Charlotte are filling with people who prefer beef on weck (roast beef on a special salty roll) and white-hots (spicy white hot dogs) to barbecue and pimento cheese.

Upstate New York-oriented restaurants such as Tavern on the Tracks in South End and Township Grille in Matthews are thriving. And the area will be the first place outside Buffalo for expansion of the Anchor Bar, pioneer of the famed Buffalo wings (slated to open near Concord Mills mall and in uptown Charlotte later this year).

Plenty of transplants come from New York City and Long Island, but the upstate has specific economic pressures behind the migration pattern.

Business and civic leaders haven't been able to replace the jobs lost as steel, automotive and other manufacturers shed workers. Housing prices have languished.

Why the Carolinas?

Better weather, for one. Also, it's roughly a one-day drive from the upstate. In recent years, the pipeline of previously arrived friends and family members has also fueled the trend.

Here, New York transplants become part of the growth pressures straining roads and schools and sparking retail and cultural development. Back home, their departures cause the opposite pressures, with governments struggling to cope with declining tax bases and theater companies closing.

An upstate N.Y. exodus

Jobs were the lure for Scott and Jean McMullen, who moved to Indian Land, just over the S.C. border from Charlotte, during Christmas week. They came from a suburb of Rochester, about 60 miles from Buffalo. Scott McMullen has been a machine designer for 28 years. But he has watched his trade decline as major employers, including Delphi Automotive, Eastman Kodak and Xerox, cut back in New York.

"For my last six months, I'd sit at my desk with nothing to do," he said.

He and his wife had talked of retiring to the Carolinas since they began visiting area beaches in the early 1990s. Fearing a layoff, they decided to speed up their plans.

McMullen got a job with Bosch Rexroth, a manufacturer with facilities in southwest Mecklenburg. Jean McMullen, who worked in information systems, figures she'll have an easier time getting a job here.

An older daughter already lived in Winston-Salem. Daughter Katie, 22, a recent graduate of SUNY-Brockport, has joined them, and a younger daughter still in college in New York will be here for the summer.

Katie McMullen said her fellow graduates are taking jobs in Texas, Florida and elsewhere -- but almost none in upstate New York.

"I thought, if everyone else is leaving, it's not bad for me to leave now," she said.

Soon after arriving, the family shopped at a local Macy's. A saleswoman recognized their accents and asked whether they were from Buffalo. But in Food Lion, they had trouble understanding a clerk's deep Southern drawl.

"Everything she said, it was like, 'I'm sorry, pardon me?' " Jean McMullen said.

'A no-brainer'

In the early 1990s, Greg Moran was a real estate agent in Buffalo. He got to know the wife of Bill Polian, then general manager of the Buffalo Bills and later the Carolina Panthers' first general manager.

That led to Moran's first Charlotte visit. It was a warm February day 13 years ago, and he saw construction cranes all over. "This is a no-brainer for someone getting into real estate," he recalled thinking.

Two weeks later, he moved here. He has since maintained a network of real-estate contacts in Buffalo and estimates he has sold at least 15 Charlotte homes to people from there.

"It's just dying up there," he said. "All the young kids, as soon as they're out of high school or college -- they don't go back."

Moran and other Buffalo transplants gathered at Tavern on the Tracks last summer to watch a preseason game between the Bills and Panthers.

In the parking lot that day, wearing a Bills jersey, was Tim Horner, 32. He was among a group of four friends who drove down from Buffalo nine years ago to find jobs here.

"I would say once a week, I meet somebody from Buffalo (in Charlotte) who I didn't know before," he said. "It's like a home away from home."

The McMullens are aware they're in a region undergoing a growth spurt. "Holy cow -- all this construction, and the red clay in the roads. They're building everywhere," said Jean McMullen.

As far as regional differences go, Scott McMullen said the family will adjust. "I'm still in America. And it still feels like America. The only thing they don't have here is white-hots." -- *Database editor Ted Mellnik contributed.*

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What the Experts Say

About why New Yorkers, particularly from the upstate, are moving to the Charlotte region:

- Pat Riley, president, Allen Tate Co.: New York is the top state of origin for the real estate company's relocating clients. "The tougher the climate, the more apt they are (to look at North Carolina)," he said. "New York (transplants) are driven by 'I want to get away from something.'"
- Peter Rogerson, professor of geography at University at Buffalo: "Our economy just isn't doing that well, and it's been that way for a while. We just haven't gotten a lot of new jobs."
- Tony Crumbley, vice president for research at the Charlotte Chamber, on the more than 80,000 new jobs announced in Mecklenburg from 2000 to 2005: "Our quality of life and our ability to generate jobs have made us a magnet."
- Andrew Rudnick, president and CEO of Buffalo-Niagara Partnership, on trying to lure new industry to upstate New York: "People follow jobs; that's Economics 101. We're the poster child for that principle."

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