Educational materials were developed through the Teaching American History in Baltimore City Program, a partnership between the Baltimore City Public School System and the Center for History Education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

**Understanding the Great Migration**

**Author:** Sherry E. Spector, Parkdale High, Prince George’s County Public Schools  
**Grade Level:** High School  
**Duration of lesson:** 2 ninety-minute class periods

**Overview:** The Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North in the first half of the 20th Century is one of the pivotal social events in U.S. history, and helped to set the stage for the modern Civil Rights movement. By examining historical letters, pictures and editorial cartoons, students will come to understand the motivations behind the migration, and its lasting impact on small communities and cities.

**Historical Thinking Standards:**

**Standard 2: Historical Comprehension**  
A. Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative and assess its credibility.

**Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation**  
B. Consider multiple perspectives.

**Standard 4: Historical Research Capabilities**  
A. Formulate historical questions.  
B. Obtain historical data from a variety of sources.

**Lesson Objectives:**

- Students will analyze primary documents to determine arguments for and against African Americans moving north during the period from the beginning of World War I until the Great Depression.  
- Students will then use these arguments to respond to a fictional character considering a move north.

**Topic Background:**

*Some are coming on the passenger,*  
*Some are coming on the freight,*  
*Others will be found walking,*  
*For none have time to wait.*

Excerpt from, “They’re Leaving Memphis,” published in the *Chicago Defender*  

Between 1910 and 1930 over a million African American sharecroppers and tenant farmers migrated from the rural South to cities north of the Mason Dixon line.  

---

Crop-destroying floods and boll weevil infestations, a labor depression began in the South in 1914 causing wages to fall dramatically. Concurrently, the onset of World War I stimulated an economic boom in the North. With many northern industrial workers drawn into the war as soldiers and trans-Atlantic travel too dangerous for immigrant laborers, the factories suddenly became desperate for people to run their machines. In response, hundreds of thousands of African Americans fled the oppressive climate of racial prejudice in the Jim Crow South for what looked to be better opportunities in the North. Charles M. Christian, in his book, Black Saga, The African American Experience (A Chronology), indicates that by 1920 there were approximately 10,463,131 total African American residents in the United States. Overall, Blacks made up 9.9 percent of the total population. Prior to 1920, most had lived in rural areas in the South. By 1920, however, a large percentage of the African American population was concentrated in the following eight cities: Chicago, Detroit, New York, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Columbus, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh. This “Great Migration” was one of the largest internal movements of people in the history of the United States and it is a shift that impacted culture, politics, and economics as new African American communities struggled to thrive in their new environs.

As African Americans began their lives as urban industrial workers in the North, they were faced with many challenges. Living conditions in poor neighborhoods in northern cities were horrendous. Like poor immigrants, African Americans lived in self-contained communities, commonly known as ghettos. African Americans, however, suffered the additional indignities of racism and the fallout from the prevailing corrupted interpretations of Darwin’s theory of evolution. Social Darwinism and Eugenics, both descendents of evolution, attempted to justify discrimination based on race and ethnicity and were prominent philosophies in northern cities. In addition, whites segregated African Americans within the industrial workplace. There were separate washrooms, for instance, and Blacks were generally relegated to areas of the factory that required the most labor-intensive and dangerous activity. Many African Americans ran north to escape the Jim Crow south, only to discover that segregation existed de facto in their new home and that discrimination and prejudice were universal.

Historians have debated the primary cause of the mass migration – was it social concerns as African Americans sought better opportunities and freedom from violent racism in the South? Was it the economic pull of labor demand in the North? How did recruiters from the North and letters home impact migration? What pressure did a backlash from Southerners angry about losing their cheap labor force exert? Why had migration not occurred earlier? Sociologist Charles Johnson tackled the question of causation as early as 1925 when he published his economic interpretation of migration. He indicated that migration was a natural outcome of economic forces at work that affected both Blacks and whites. If racial persecutions were the principle cause of the migration, he argued, African Americans might have moved north in the sixty years following the end of the Civil War, not further south. Moreover, after looking at county data for lynching and population growth, he concluded that there was no evidence that

5 Ibid, 318.
6 Henri, Black Migration Movement North 1900-1920, 69.
8 Ibid., 78.
Educational materials were developed through the Teaching American History in Baltimore City Program, a partnership between the Baltimore City Public School System and the Center for History Education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

African Americans were fleeing from the places where lynching was most frequent. Racial segregation, persecution, and second-class citizenship were facts of life for African Americans in the South. They knew what to expect from their misery; they "knew their place" in the South.

Given this evidence, arguments turn to the economic incentives of the industrial labor force in the North as far outweighing the poor social conditions in the South as a motivator for many African Americans who made the move. Advertisements and propaganda from both Blacks and whites also played a significant role in fueling and extending the impact of the potential financial gains presented by the labor demands in the North. African American newspapers like The Chicago Defender's National Edition, read widely in the South, displayed help-wanted ads from the North along side detailed accounts of lynching in the South, creating a push-pull effect. These ads and articles served several purposes: 1) to inform and encourage African Americans to migrate north, 2) to protest the horrible conditions in the South, and 3) to serve as a conduit for opportunity and advancement for African Americans. Indeed, African American newspapers sent out the clarion call for those willing to make the decision to leave the South. Franklin and Moss report, "The Chicago Defender exclaimed, "To die from the bite of frost is far more glorious than at the hands of the mob." In 1917 the Christian Recorder wrote, "If a million Negroes move north and west in the next twelve-month, it will be one of the greatest things for the Negro since the Emancipation Proclamation."

Letters home from African Americans in the North also served as a motivator for friends and family members to follow their path. Published in many northern African American newspapers, these letters generally painted a rosy picture of migration, extolling the virtues of increased opportunity for work, education, and equality. In addition, labor agents employed by large industrial enterprises were sent down to solicit and recruit laborers. "In 1916, the first year of large-scale movement, most agents were representing railroads or the mines...For example in 1917 a special train was sent to carry 191 black migrants from Besemer, Alabama, to Pittsburgh at a cost to a coal company of $3,391,950." Many were recruited to work in the steel mills, munitions plants, and other industry directly or indirectly related to the war effort.

While many African Americans wanted to leave the South, some were terrified that they may be persecuted and pay the ultimate price – death; others were probably paralyzed by the fear of the unknown. In addition, as time passed more and more of the letters being sent home told stories of people unable to find work, facing horrible discrimination and/or being forced to work under deplorable conditions. In some cases, as historian Florette Henri observes, "Anyone who advised against going was suspected of being in the pay of whites. If a black businessman opposed migration, his customers began to vanish. In one instance, a minister who preached against migration from the pulpit was stabbed the early next day." Hush-hush talk about news of job offers and available transportation only increased concern, anxiety, and unrest in African American communities in the South.

Although African Americans did not enjoy the benefits of democracy, still they fought valiantly to defend it in World War I. Yet, even in the war, they faced racism and segregation only to return to the same conditions at home. After the war, many people in the United States experienced the benefits of the nation’s economic boom. African Americans, however, did not

9 Ibid.
10 Henri, Black Migration Movement North 1900-1920, 59.
12 Henri, Black Migration Movement North 1900-1920, 60.
13 Ibid., 59.
Educational materials were developed through the Teaching American History in Baltimore City Program, a partnership between the Baltimore City Public School System and the Center for History Education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

share equally in the new prosperity. Still, their earnings in the North far outstripped what they would have made in the South. Henri indicates, “the North during the war years beckoned with factory wages as high as $3.00 or $4.00 a day.”\(^\text{14}\) In a letter from an African American migrant who had recently settled in Cleveland to relatives in the South, the author wrote that he “regularly earned $3.60 a day, and sometimes double that, and with the pay of his wife, son, and two oldest daughters, the family took in $103.60 every ten days; the only thing that cost them more than at home, he said, was the rent, $12 a month.”\(^\text{15}\)

It may appear incongruous that African Americans, who many assume were principally farmers, were recruited for skilled, semi-skilled, and non-skilled work in the industrial centers of the North. Upon closer examination, however a Labor Department survey found that half the migrants came from towns.\(^\text{16}\) Other migrant men and women found work in domestic labor jobs such as cooks, housemaids, janitors, butlers, chauffeurs, laundresses and the like. Not surprisingly, there was a much smaller professional class that, in some cases, followed the migrants north: small-business owners, insurance men, movers, lawyers, and teachers.

Migrants who made the trip underwent a significant transition as they sought employment in a new, unfamiliar environment. The southern way of living was far different from the North. City life in these industrial centers required one to adapt to a faster pace that promoted individualism and independence. For many African Americans who were accustomed to submission, degradation, and umbrage, this new life was radically different. African Americans who were fortunate to be hired to work in factories felt that it was a considerable improvement over other forms of menial labor, even at the expense of crossing picket lines during strikes. Whites, however, perceived the new workers as a threat to their livelihood. Not only did African Americans compete for jobs, they often were strikebreakers, who raised the ire of striking white workers and further inflamed already existing racial tensions. Though the extent to which African Americans were used as strikebreakers has been exaggerated, they played an important role in breaking strikes in such industries as slaughtering, steel, coal and mining, automobiles, and railroads. White workers were also extensively employed to break strikes in these industries, but the African Americans were far more noticeable and far more resented by strikers.\(^\text{17}\) African American migrants created great resentment among the unions like the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and most African Americans were excluded from organized union activity.

Resentment over the perceived loss of jobs, the expanding migrant populations, and a distinct infusion of African American culture, exploded into race riots. In 1919 they erupted in New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Charlestown, Omaha, in East St. Louis, and in Chicago among other places. In the city of Chicago alone, “After a week of sheer terror throughout the city, twenty-three whites and twenty-five Negroes [sic] were dead, 537 persons injured, and an estimated 1,000 left homeless.”\(^\text{18}\) By the end of the year, race riots had damaged at least 25 cities throughout the North and West.\(^\text{19}\) Many lay dead or injured among the millions of dollars in damages. Ku Klux Klan membership increased, attracting hundreds to march openly in the streets and threatening African Americans with a reign of terror.

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 54.
\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 55.
\(^\text{16}\) Ibid., 69.
\(^\text{18}\) Henri, Black Migration Movement North, 1900-1920, 320.
Educational materials were developed through the Teaching American History in Baltimore City Program, a partnership between the Baltimore City Public School System and the Center for History Education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

African Americans, however, fought back, promoting defiance among their ranks and sending a clear message that they would not shrink from discrimination, bigotry, and blatant violence. Claude McKay, the Jamaican-born poet, summed up the defiance with his vigorous poem, “If We Must Die.”

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an ignoble [undignified] spot.

Like men we’ll face the murderous,
Cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying
But fighting back!20

After fighting valiantly for the United States in World War I, many African Americans felt as though it was time to demand the full democratic privileges that they were supposedly fighting to defend but which had so often been denied to them. The violence of the “Red Summer” in 1919 did not prevent the NAACP, the Urban League or other organizations from attempting to improve work opportunities and quality of life issues, as well as to organize workers from within the labor movement. Leaders such as Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph would devote their careers to undoing the injustices that African Americans faced in the industrial workplace. Randolph, especially, was a relentless campaigner and indefatigable in stamping out racial discrimination and social injustice. After establishing themselves in northern communities, many African American men and women came to agree with these leaders and with W. E. B. DuBois that it was time to demand racial equality with whites.

Week after week, month after month, African Americans made their way to the industrial centers in the North. The South was slow to realize the profound implications of this migration - the damage to its regional and local economies was irreparable. There was a grudging recognition that the backbone of the workforce was the African American. Regardless of his lowly place in southern society, the African American was a valuable commodity and a necessary factor that sustained the southern way of life.

In fact, the Great Migration impacted all aspects of American life. Politically, migration to the urban North established African Americans as a prime element of the new Democratic Party coalition that began to coalesce in the late 1920s and swept Franklin D. Roosevelt to power in 1933. Socially, African Americans experiencing discrimination even in the North helped to fuel the growing consensus that inequality was unacceptable and that Blacks, with the help of sympathetic whites, must work together to end Jim Crow segregation. Culturally, the power of African American music, literature and art burst from the urban neighborhoods of the North and impacted the identity of American art forever through the Harlem Renaissance. The largest internal migration in United States history changed the political, social and cultural scene permanently.

Bibliography

Educational materials were developed through the Teaching American History in Baltimore City Program, a partnership between the Baltimore City Public School System and the Center for History Education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

**Secondary Sources:**


_____. *Teacher’s Resource Manuel: The African American Experience, A History*. Englewood Cliffs: Globe Book Company A Division of Simon & Schuster, 1992. *The African American Experience A History* is a supplementary textbook that surveys African American History beginning with prehistory to 1600 through 1972 to the present. This survey incorporates biographies, galleries of musicians, scientists, writers, and performing artists, as well as maps, charts and graphs, and skill-building exercises. The text is suitable for 9th, 10th, or 11th graders depending upon their reading level.


Marshall, Ray. *The Negro and Organized Labor*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, INC., 1965. The writing style is somewhat dated and the information dense. However, it is a good resource should the reader want detailed information regarding blacks and the labor movement.

**Secondary Sources:**
Maps created by Josh Radinsky for the Big City Teacher Preparation Initiative, University of Illinois at Chicago. Data source for the maps: GeoStat Center's U.S. Historical Census Data Web Site, University of
Educational materials were developed through the Teaching American History in Baltimore City Program, a partnership between the Baltimore City Public School System and the Center for History Education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.


**Vocabulary:**

National Advancement of Colored People (NAACP): US civil rights organization. Founded in 1909, its objectives are “to achieve through peaceful and lawful means, equal citizenship rights for all American citizens

National Urban League: Voluntary community service agency, founded in 1910, with the goal of ending segregation and helping African Americans

Tenant farmer: Someone who farms rented land. In the post Civil War south, this was a way of maintaining control over African Americans by forcing them heavily into debt and denying them the opportunity to own their own land.

Great Migration: The large, systematic movement of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban north in the early part of the 20th Century

Migrants: Workers who moved from place to place to do seasonal work, or those who moved to the North to work in factories

Tenement: Cheap, urban housing that was typified by cramped, unsanitary conditions and overcrowding. Also dangerous as there crowding and cheap construction made them fire hazards.

Lynching: A form of racial violence common in the South after the Civil War, when gangs would hang African Americans who were seen as uppity or threatening. Perhaps as many as 3,500 blacks were lynched in the South between 1865 and 1968, when federal laws were passed to prevent it.

Wages: Money paid to workers for their labor.

Strike: A form of protest used by workers, in which they would refuse to work until their demands for better hours or higher wages were met. The phrase comes from the Royal Navy, when sailors would protest by taking down or ‘striking’ the sails on naval vessels.

Picket line: A boundary established by workers on strike, often at the entrance to their job, that others are asked not to cross

**Teaching Procedures:**

**Materials:**
Maps, Primary Source Document packets, Group Analysis Worksheet
Motivation:
1) Split the class into heterogeneous cooperative groups of 4-6 students.
2) Give each group a set of maps showing the demographic changes in the population of African-Americans from 1910-1920.
3) Ask them to record on their group worksheet:
   a. Describe the changes as accurately as possible;
   b. Write 5 reasons why they think these changes might be happening.

Procedures:
1. Review with students the causes of the Great Migration. Especially emphasize the role of World War I, which strangled the supply of cheap immigrant labor; the rise of the industrial factory jobs in the north, which depended on cheap labor to function; and the difficulties of life in the Jim Crow south for African American families, such as discrimination, lynching, denial of access to political equality, and the lack of educational opportunities.

2. Explain to students that they are going to use a series of primary documents to develop arguments for and against moving North as an African American in the post-World War I period. Then, they will be asked to take on particular roles and participate in a town meeting to either vote to encourage or discourage migration.

3. Read Document A together and complete the document analysis portion of the group worksheet together as a class to model the process of analyzing documents. Repeat the process with one of the photographs or drawings in order to model the interpretation of visual as well as literary sources. Depending on the class’ familiarity with this process you may have to model more than one document.

4. Have students complete the rest of the document analysis worksheet in their groups and circulate to monitor their progress.

5. After students complete their analysis, summarize the major points in all documents together as a class. Also, ask students to brainstorm other reasons that people may or may not want to move north that were not contained in the documents (i.e., ). Point out to students that recognizing that the historical record may have gaps that need to be investigated is an important skill of an historian.

6. At the conclusion of reviewing the arguments, assign each group 2 characters and have them complete the character portion of the worksheet.

7. As a summary activity bring the class together as a whole and have them wear signs to indicate which character each pair represents. Place the desks in a circle so that everyone can be seen (use the inner circle/outer circle method for larger classes). During the town meeting have them introduce themselves and tell the class something about their personal history. Next present them with the following situation:

    It is the year 1919 and Charles Green is a 20 year-old steelworker from Alabama who has been trying for two years to get steady work. His aunt
and uncle have moved north to Chicago and have been writing letters back to Alabama to try to get Charles to join them.

Their task as a group is to make recommendations as to whether or not Charles Green should move north to join his aunt and uncle. At the conclusion of the conversation have the class vote as to which side articulated the most convincing argument. Next, ask them to step outside of their characters and think about (either in discussion or as a written exercise) what they personally would have done if they were Charles and why they would have made that choice.

Closure: Brainstorm with the class ideas about how the migration north of so many African Americans might have changed America. What was the probable impact on the South? What was the probable impact on the North?

Assessment: Assess the Group Analysis Worksheets and the Town Meeting.

Extension Activities:
1) Have students research the connection between the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance.

2) Have students compare and contrast the experiences of African American who moved North to work in factories during World War I and those who went to fight in the war.

3) Ask students to investigate their character from the town meeting more fully and to write a diary of that person’s experiences during the Great Migration using real historical events to support their story.

Attached resource sheets for the teacher:
1. Maps showing African American migration during the years 1890-1960
2. Understanding the Great Migration Group Analysis Worksheet
3. Primary Source Documents

Primary Sources Annotations:
The primary sources were gathered from two primary internet sites. The first, the American Memory portion of The Library of Congress website (www.memory.loc.gov), is an invaluable source for primary documents from all eras of United States history. While they do not have an extensive collection of documents specifically from the Great Migration, the ones seen below are all from an on-line exhibit concerning the positive and negative experiences of migrants to Chicago. The second webstie is from the National Archives (www.archives.gov). While cumbersome to search (unless what you want is already organized into an on-line exhibit), the National Archives website also has a treasure-trove of sources available from all eras of history. The documents listed below, all visual, demonstrate a variety of perceptions about migration north.

Source A: Letter from Mrs. J.H. Adams to the Bethlehem Baptist Association
Educational materials were developed through the Teaching American History in Baltimore City Program, a partnership between the Baltimore City Public School System and the Center for History Education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/images/adams.jpg

[Letter from Mrs. J. H Adams, Macon, Georgia, to the Bethlehem Baptist Association in Chicago, Illinois,] 1918 Holograph Carter G. Woodson Papers Manuscript Division (119)

Source B: Letter from Cleveland Gaillard to the Bethlehem Baptist Association
http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/images/galliard.jpg

[Letter from Cleveland Galliard of Mobile, Alabama, to the Bethlehem Baptist Association, Chicago, Illinois,] 1917 Holograph Carter G. Woodson Papers Manuscript Division (120)

Source C: Photograph Depicting African American Man Picketing a Milk Company
http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/images/dairy.jpg

Carrying a sign in front of a milk company, Chicago, Illinois, July 1941 John Vachon, Photographer Gelatin-silver print FSA-OWI Collection Prints and Photographs Division (123)

Source D: Photograph of Picket Line at the Mid-City Realty Company
http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/images/picket.jpg

Picket line at the Mid-City Realty Company, Chicago, Illinois, July 1941 John Vachon, Photographer Gelatin-silver print FSA-OWI Collection Prints and Photographs Division (124)

Source E: Photograph of the Perfect Eat Shop

http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/images/eatshop.jpg

The Perfect Eat Shop, a restaurant on 47th street near South Park, owned by Mr. Ernest Morris, Chicago, Illinois, April 1942 Jack Delano, Photographer FSA-OWI Collection Prints and Photographs Division (125)

Source F: Photograph of Tenement Housing in One of Chicago’s Poor African American Neighborhoods

http://www.loc.gov/exhibitsafrican/images/aptbuild.jpg

Apartment building in a black section of Chicago, Illinois, April 1941 Russell Lee, Photographer Gelatin-silver print FSA-OWI Collection Prints and Photographs Division (126)

Source G: Letter From a Northern Migrant
Educational materials were developed through the Teaching American History in Baltimore City Program, a partnership between the Baltimore City Public School System and the Center for History Education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

Source H: Letter from a Southerner Wishing to Move North

Source I: Minutes from the Committee on Urban Conditions First Meeting
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aaohtml/exhibit/aopart6b.html

Source J: Antagonism between white and Negro workers resulted in race riots
http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=3&rn=3&tn=559080&st=b&rp=details&nh=100
Still Picture Records LICON, Special Media Archives Services Division (NWCS-S), National Archives at College Park, 8601 Adelphi Road, College Park, MD 20740-6001 PHONE: 301-837-3530, FAX: 301-837-3621, EMAIL: stillpix@nara.gov
Select List Identifier: HARMON FOUNDATION #058
NAIL Control Number: NWDNS-200-HN-LA-50
Local Identifier: NWDNS-H-HN-LA-50

Source K: The Negro was the largest source of labor after all others had been exhausted
Still Picture Records LICON, Special Media Archives Services Division (NWCS-S), National Archives at College Park, 8601 Adelphi Road, College Park, MD 20740-6001 PHONE: 301-837-3530, FAX: 301-837-3621, EMAIL: stillpix@nara.gov

Source L: The migration gained in momentum
http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=10&rn=10&tn=559082&st=b&rp=details&nh=100
Still Picture Records LICON, Special Media Archives Services Division (NWCS-S), National Archives at College Park, 8601 Adelphi Road, College Park, MD 20740-6001 PHONE: 301-837-3530, FAX: 301-837-3621, EMAIL: stillpix@nara.gov

Source M: Many migrants found poor housing conditions in the North
Still Picture Records LICON, Special Media Archives Services Division (NWCS-S), National Archives at College Park, 8601 Adelphi Road, College Park, MD 20740-6001 PHONE: 301-837-3530, FAX: 301-837-3621, EMAIL: stillpix@nara.gov

Source N: Negroes were leaving by the hundreds to go north and enter northern industry
http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=1&rn=14&tn=559078&st=b&rp=summary&nh=100&si=0
Educational materials were developed through the Teaching American History in Baltimore City Program, a partnership between the Baltimore City Public School System and the Center for History Education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

Still Picture Records LICON, Special Media Archives Services Division (NWCS-S), National Archives at College Park, 8601 Adelphi Road, College Park, MD 20740-6001 PHONE: 301-837-3530, FAX: 301-837-3621, EMAIL: stillpix@nara.gov

Source O: Another cause for Negroes leaving the South was lynching http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=22&rn=22&tn=559081&st=b&rp=details&nh=100

Still Picture Records LICON, Special Media Archives Services Division (NWCS-S), National Archives at College Park, 8601 Adelphi Road, College Park, MD 20740-6001 PHONE: 301-837-3530, FAX: 301-837-3621, EMAIL: stillpix@nara.gov