

## **The Great Migration—*from [history.com](#)***

*The Great Migration, or the relocation of more than 6 million African Americans from the rural South to the cities of the North, Midwest and West from 1916 to 1970, had a huge impact on urban life in the United States. Driven from their homes by unsatisfactory economic opportunities and harsh segregationist laws, many blacks headed north, where they took advantage of the need for industrial workers that first arose during the First World War. As Chicago, New York and other cities saw their black populations expand exponentially, migrants were forced to deal with poor working conditions and competition for living space, as well as widespread racism and prejudice. During the Great Migration, African Americans began to build a new place for themselves in public life, actively confronting economic, political and social challenges and creating a new black urban culture that would exert enormous influence in the decades to come.*

### **Context and Causes of the Great Migration**

After the post-Civil War Reconstruction period ended in 1876, white supremacy was largely restored across the South, and the segregationist policies known as Jim Crow soon became the law of the land. Southern blacks were forced to make their living working the land as part of the sharecropping system, which offered little in the way of economic opportunity, especially after a boll weevil epidemic in 1898 caused massive crop damage across the South. And while the [Ku Klux Klan](#) (KKK) had been officially dissolved in 1869, it continued underground after that, and intimidation, violence and even lynching of black southerners were not uncommon practices in the Jim Crow South.

After [World War I](#) broke out in Europe in 1914, industrialized urban areas in the North, Midwest and West faced a shortage of industrial laborers, as the war put an end to the steady tide of European immigration to the [United States](#). With war production kicking into high gear, recruiters enticed African Americans to come north, to the dismay of white Southerners. Black newspapers--particularly the widely read [Chicago Defender](#)--published advertisements touting the opportunities available in the cities of the North and West, along with first-person accounts of success.

### **Great Migration: Life for Migrants in the City**

By the end of 1919, some 1 million blacks had left the South, usually traveling by train, boat or bus; a smaller number had [automobiles](#) or even horse-drawn carts. In the decade between 1910 and 1920, the black population of major Northern cities grew by large percentages, including [New York](#) (66 percent) Chicago (148 percent), Philadelphia (500 percent) and Detroit (611 percent). Many new arrivals found jobs in factories, slaughterhouses and foundries, where working conditions were arduous and sometimes dangerous. Female migrants had a harder time finding work, spurring heated competition for domestic labor positions.

Aside from competition for employment, there was also competition for living space in the increasingly crowded cities. While segregation was not legalized in the North (as it was in the South), racism and prejudice were widespread. After the U.S. Supreme Court declared racially based housing ordinances unconstitutional in 1917, some residential

neighborhoods enacted covenants requiring white property owners to agree not to sell to blacks; these would remain legal until the Court struck them down in 1948.

Rising rents in segregated areas, plus a resurgence of KKK activity after 1915, worsened black and white relations across the country. The summer of 1919 began the greatest period of interracial strife in U.S. history, including a disturbing wave of race riots. The most serious took place in Chicago in July 1919; it lasted 13 days and left 38 people dead, 537 injured and 1,000 black families without homes.

### **Impact of the Great Migration**

As a result of housing tensions, many blacks ended up creating their own cities within big cities, fostering the growth of a new urban African-American culture. The most prominent example was Harlem in [New York City](#), a formerly all-white neighborhood that by the [1920s](#) housed some 200,000 African Americans. The black experience during the Great Migration became an important theme in the artistic movement known first as the New Negro Movement and later as the [Harlem Renaissance](#), which would have an enormous impact on the culture of the era. The Great Migration also began a new era of increasing political activism among African Americans, who after being disenfranchised in the South found a new place for themselves in public life in the cities of the North and West.

Black migration slowed considerably in the [1930s](#), when the country sank into the [Great Depression](#), but picked up again with the coming of [World War II](#). By 1970, when the Great Migration ended, its demographic impact was unmistakable: Whereas in 1900, nine out of every 10 black Americans lived in the South, and three out of every four lived on farms, by 1970 the South was home to less than half of the country's African-Americans, with only 25 percent living in the region's rural areas.

## ▶ THE GREAT MIGRATION (1900-1970)

Within the black community, there had been constant migration since the end of the nineteenth century. Much of that migration had taken place within the South as blacks migrated from place to place trying to make a decent living. In the twentieth century, blacks started to move to the North as the train provided easy access to Chicago and other Northern cities. When World War I began in Europe, and foreign workers could no longer emigrate to America, factories needed a new labor source. Hundreds of thousands of blacks migrated from the South to Chicago and other cities of the North. The CHICAGO DEFENDER, the most influential black newspaper, encouraged blacks to leave. The paper held a vision of the North as the land of freedom, a dream that has been in the hearts of black men and women since slavery time -- many referred to the North as "The Promised Land" Young Richard Wright, who became an internationally acclaimed writer, remembered how the North kept hope alive during the dark days of his childhood in the deep South. "The North symbolized to me all that I had not felt or seen; it had no relation to what actually existed. Yet by imagining a place where everything is possible, it kept hope alive inside of me."

Southern whites feared the migration would deprive them of black labor. Blacks saw the exodus as a fulfillment of God's promise. A Birmingham minister offered the following prayer to his congregation: "We feel and believe that this great Exodus is God's hand and plan. In a mysterious way God is moving upon the hearts of our people to go where He has prepared for them." Among those who migrated were the most creative people in the South. Jazz musicians came from New Orleans to play in Chicago, Kansas City, and New York. Blues players came from the Delta. The NAACP welcomed writers and poets like writer Zora Neale Hurston, poet Langston Hughes, and sculptor Augusta Savage. They, along with poet Countee Cullen and other black artists, created a cultural explosion known as the "Harlem Renaissance." The migration slowed down during the Depression in the 1930s but picked up speed when World War II began. Again jobs opened up in factories. At the same time, mechanization came to the cotton fields, displacing many black farmers. Between the period 1910 and 1970, an estimated six million blacks migrated from the South.

-- Richard Wormser

## *The Harlem Renaissance — From History.com*

Spanning the 1920s to the mid-1930s, the Harlem Renaissance was a literary, artistic, and intellectual movement that kindled a new black cultural identity. Its essence was summed up by critic and teacher Alain Locke in 1926 when he declared that through art, "Negro life is seizing its first chances for group expression and self determination." Harlem became the center of a "spiritual coming of age" in which Locke's "New Negro" transformed "social disillusionment to race pride." Chiefly literary, the Renaissance included the visual arts but excluded jazz, despite its parallel emergence as a black art form.

### **Harlem Renaissance**

The nucleus of the movement included Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Rudolph Fisher, Wallace Thurman, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Nella Larsen, Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston. An older generation of writers and intellectuals--James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Alain Locke, and Charles S. Johnson--served as mentors.

The publishing industry, fueled by whites' fascination with the exotic world of Harlem, sought out and published black writers. With much of the literature focusing on a realistic portrayal of black life, conservative black critics feared that the depiction of ghetto realism would impede the cause of racial equality. The intent of the movement, however, was not political but aesthetic. Any benefit a burgeoning black contribution to literature might have in defraying racial prejudice was secondary to, as Langston Hughes put it, the "expression of our individual dark-skinned selves."

The Harlem Renaissance influenced future generations of black writers, but it was largely ignored by the literary establishment after it waned in the [1930s](#). With the advent of the [civil rights movement](#), it again acquired wider recognition.

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