

# RESISTING OPPRESSION, CLAIMING FREEDOM



## ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What was the Great Migration and why did so many Black Americans migrate north during the early 1900s?



## OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Define the Great Migration and examine a map illustrating it.
- Discuss the factors that pushed people from the South and pulled them to other parts of the country.
- Analyze photos depicting some of the benefits and challenges for Black Americans in the North.
- Compose a piece of writing demonstrating their understanding of some of the experiences of people who were part of the Great Migration.



## LEARNING STANDARDS

See the [standards alignment chart](#) to learn how this lesson supports New Jersey State Standards.



## TIME NEEDED

100 minutes



## MATERIALS

- AV equipment for projecting a map and images
- *The Great Migration: Journey to the North* by Eloise Greenfield (book)
- *The Migration Series, Panel No. 1* handout (one copy to project)
- *The Great Migration* handout (one copy to project)
- *Moving North: Observations* handout (one copy per small group)
- *Moving North: Photos* handout (one copy per small group)
- *Moving North: Background* handout (one copy for teacher reference)



## VOCABULARY

discrimination  
Great Migration

housing project  
migration

segregation  
slum

# Procedures

## NOTE

The *Migration Series* is a sequence of 60 panels created by the African American painter Jacob Lawrence. Published in 1941, they depict the experiences of Black people during the Great Migration to northern and western states that took place beginning in 1916. The artist conceived the series as a single work with a connected narrative. Lawrence grew up in the North, but his parents were from Virginia and South Carolina, and part of the Great Migration. For more information, visit <https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org>.

## NOTE

If students ask about the Ku Klux Klan, explain that it is a hate group that believes white people are superior and that has used violence to intimidate Black people as well as other groups that are different from them.

## PART 1

### Leaving Home (40 mins.)

1

Project the handout *The Migration Series, Panel No. 1*. Have students engage in a think-pair-share in response to one or more of the questions below. Discuss their responses, the mood of the painting and how it makes them feel.

- What do you notice about the people in the painting? Who might they be?
- Where are the people? Where are they going? What might be the reason?
- What does the title of the painting mean? How might it explain what these people are doing?

2

Ask what *migration* means and define it as the act of moving from one place to another. Explain that over 100 years ago, many Black Americans began a migration from the southern parts of the U.S., where they lived, to the northern and western parts; from 1916–1970, more than 6 million Black people made this move.

3

Project the handout *The Great Migration* and explore the map together. Identify which states Black people migrated *from* and the cities and states they migrated to. Point out that the Jacob Lawrence painting depicts this mass migration to large northern cities. Ask students why so many Black people during this time may have wanted to leave their homes and start a new life in the North.

4

Read aloud *The Great Migration: Journey to the North* by Eloise Greenfield and discuss some of the questions below as you read.

- What was life like for many Black Americans in the South during the early 1900s?
- What was “the news” that spread across southern communities about life in the North? [*The story mentions better jobs, nicer houses and “no Ku Klux Klan.”*]

- What different feelings did people have about saying good-bye to their homes in the South? What things were they most happy and sad to leave behind?
- What different thoughts and feelings did people have as they imagined life in northern cities?
- What hopes and dreams did people have as they arrived in the North to start a new life?
- What groups of people have migrated in today's world to seek a better life? Do you know why they migrated?

## PART 2

### Life Up North (60 mins.)

- 5 Repeat the line at the end of Greenfield's book: "We were one family among the many thousands, Mama and Daddy leaving home, coming to the city with their hopes and their courage and their dreams and other children to make a better life." Ask students what specific hopes and dreams these families had and list their ideas on the board. Possible responses include a good education, better jobs, improved housing and freedom from segregation and discrimination.
- 6 Tell students they will be viewing photos of life in the North for Black people and thinking about whether their hopes and dreams were achieved. Divide the class into small groups and provide each with the handouts *Moving North: Observations* and *Moving North: Photos*. Review the instructions and answer any questions students may have.
- 7 Reconvene and discuss students' observations. Make sure they understand that while Black Americans enjoyed new freedoms in the North, they also faced continued segregation, prejudice and related problems, such as poverty.
- 8 Individually or in pairs, have students choose one photo to focus on in more depth. Tell them to pretend they are the photographer and to write about the image. They may do this in the form of a diary entry or a brief article to be published in a local newspaper. Direct students to draw upon what they have learned about Jim Crow and the Great Migration, and to imagine what the photographer might have seen, thought and felt in that moment.
- 9 As time allows, have students share their writing with one another. Conclude the lesson by discussing some of the questions on the following page.

#### NOTE

*The Great Migration: Journey to the North* is a collection of poems and artwork that explores the experiences and feelings of Black families who left the South to find better lives in northern cities. Greenfield's own family migrated from North Carolina to Washington, D.C., when she was just four months old. If you do not have access to this book, a read-aloud is available online at <https://bit.ly/3diAC5z> [8:47].

#### NOTE

Refer to the handout *Moving North: Background* for photo context that may help students with their analysis.



# Discussion Questions

1

What were the conditions that *pushed* so many Black Americans to leave the South?

2

What were the conditions that *pulled* them to northern cities and states?

3

What did it feel like for the migrants to start a new life in a strange place? What were some of their hopes and fears?

4

What rights did Black people have in the North that they were denied in the South?

5

What challenges to equality did Black Americans experience in the North? Do you think they were surprised by this? Why?

6

How do you think the Great Migration changed the people who were a part of it?

7

Do you know about groups today who have migrated from their home countries in large numbers? What caused them to migrate? How do you think we should treat migrant groups in our school or community?

# Lesson Extensions

- Have students read the picture book *The Great Migration: An American Story* (see Additional Resources), which features paintings from Jacob Lawrence’s *Migration Series*; or explore panels from the series online. Assign students to create original artwork that depicts some of the people or experiences they learned about during their study of the Great Migration.
- View the Newark Public Library’s exhibits on the Great Migration (<https://bit.ly/2NEJPL1>): “From the South to Newark” and “Zaundria Mapson.” Explore the experiences of Black people who migrated to New Jersey. If possible, have students interview a family or community member who was part of the Great Migration, or invite in a guest speaker who can share their personal experiences during this era.
- Discuss with students the ways in which Black arts and culture thrived in many northern cities during the era of the Great Migration. Have them research an artist and create a poster or multimedia presentation about that person’s artistic life and contributions. Examples include:

NAME	TYPE OF ART	BORN IN	MIGRATED TO
Eubie Blake	musician	Maryland	New York
John Coltrane	musician	North Carolina	Philadelphia
Aaron Douglas	visual artist/painter	Kansas	New York
Walter Ellison	visual artist/painter	Georgia	Chicago
John Lee Hooker	musician	Mississippi	Detroit
Zora Neale Hurston	writer	Alabama	New York
Bessie Smith	musician	Tennessee	Philadelphia
Richard Wright	writer	Mississippi	Chicago

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + Digital Public Library of America. “Primary Source Sets: The Great Migration.” <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-great-migration>.
- + Imani, Blair. *Making Our Way Home: The Great Migration and the Black American Dream*. New York: Ten Speed Press, 2020.
- + Lawrence, Jacob and Myers, Walter Dean. *The Great Migration: An American Story*. Logan, IA: Perfection Learning, 1995.
- + Newark Public Library. “My Newark Story.” <https://npl.org/mynewarkstory>.
- + PBS Learning Media. “The Great Migration—New Jersey: Then and Now.” <https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/great-migration-new-jersey-video/new-jersey-then-and-now>.
- + The Phillips Collection. “Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series.” <https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org>.
- + Woodson, Jacqueline. *This Is the Rope: A Story from the Great Migration*. London: Puffin Books, 2017.



## The Migration Series, Panel No. 1



SOURCE: Lawrence, Jacob, *The Migration Series, Panel no. 1: During World War I there was a great migration north by southern African Americans, 1940–1941*. The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

# The Great Migration



SOURCE: Siegel, Michael, *The Great Migration, 1900-1929*, 2005, New York Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/85f0908d-8265-f747-e040-e00a18062131>.



# Moving North: Observations

In *The Great Migration: Journey to the North* by Eloise Greenfield, the author writes: “We were one family among the many thousands, Mama and Daddy leaving home, coming to the city with their hopes and their courage and their dreams and other children to make a better life.”

Examine the photos of life in the North. Cut them apart and place each into one of the categories below. Note what you observe about each photo and why you chose one category or the other. Then answer the question at the bottom of this page.

**HOPES AND DREAMS FULFILLED**

**HOPES AND DREAMS DENIED**

**Drawing Conclusions:** Do you think life improved for the Black Americans who migrated to the North? Explain why.

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# Moving North: Photos





# Moving North: Photos



3



4



# Moving North: Photos





# Moving North: Background

- 1 This photo of a Black teacher at an integrated school was taken in 1922 in New York City by Carter G. Woodson, a historian and writer who was known as the “Father of Black History.”

SOURCE: Godwin Woodson, Carter, *A result of the migration; A Negro teacher with pupils of both races*, 1922, Digital Public Library, accessed February 10, 2021, <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-great-migration/sources/536>.

- 2 Two boys are transporting wood scraps to earn money on the Lower East Side of New York City in the early 1900s. The photo was taken by Lewis Hine, a photographer and sociologist famous for using his camera to draw attention to social problems such as poverty and child labor.

SOURCE: Hine, Lewis, *Two Boys Transporting Wood Scraps*, 1900–1937, New York Public Library Digital Collections, accessed February 10, 2021, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-a978-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

- 3 This 1922 photo shows Black women in Chicago, Illinois, working in a large apron factory. Such jobs would not have been available to them in the South during this era.

SOURCE: *Negro women employed on power machines in a large apron factory*, 1922, New York Public Library Digital Collections, accessed February 10, 2021, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-1f1a-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

- 4 Due to discrimination, many Black people were forced to live in segregated housing in slum areas. This photo is set in Newark, New Jersey, during the 1940s or 1950s.

SOURCE: *Sidewalk view of “slum” housing in Newark*, WPA Photographs, New Jersey State Archives, accessed February 10, 2021, <http://riseupnewark.com/chapters/chapter-2/african-american-migration-pt-2>.

- 5 In this 1941 photo, children are lined up in front of a movie theater on Easter Sunday in Chicago, Illinois.

SOURCE: *Children in front of moving picture theater, Easter Sunday matinee, Black Belt, Chicago, Illinois*, 1941, Library of Congress, accessed February 10, 2021, <https://loc.getarchive.net/media/children-in-front-of-moving-picture-theater-easter-sunday-matinee-black-belt-5>.

- 6 This sign was posted opposite the Sojourner Truth homes in Detroit, Michigan, in 1942. The homes were part of a federally funded housing project. A riot was caused by white neighbors trying to prevent Black tenants from moving in.

SOURCE: Siegel, Arthur S., *We want white tenants*, February 1942, United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., accessed February 10, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:We\\_want\\_white\\_tenants.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:We_want_white_tenants.jpg).