

## Historical Context: The “Great Migration” and the Harlem Renaissance



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The Migration Series, 1940-41

**Migration** is the movement of a group of people from one country, region, or place to another. When the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, approximately 92 percent of the African-American population lived in the Southern United States. However, in the early part of the twentieth century African-Americans began what would later be called the “Great Migration,” as a large population of the black community moved from the oppressive South to the relatively less restricted Northern states.

An early migration from the rural South to Northern cities occurred between 1879 and 1881, when approximately 60,000 African-Americans moved into Kansas and Oklahoma in search of social and economic freedom. At the beginning of the twentieth century, blacks left the Southern region to escape racial violence and oppression, worsening economic conditions, political pressures, and limited work opportunities. During World War I, between 300,000 and 1,000,000 African- and Caribbean- Americans migrated to urban centers in New York, St. Louis, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and Pittsburgh, in

search of new opportunities as white men left their jobs for military service.

One of the greatest centers of the African-American migration was the neighborhood known as Harlem, within the city of New York. By 1920, Harlem had become a primarily black community and a center for African-American culture, politics, art, literature, music, and drama. It was in Harlem that blacks were encouraged to celebrate their heritage and community, and to cultivate the culture that had been forgotten or previously ignored. As a result, writers, artists, and musicians abounded in Harlem; names such as writers Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Du Bois, Jean Toomer, and Zora Neale Hurston; musicians, singers, and actors like Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, and Josephine Baker; artists such as William H. Johnson, Hale Woodruff, and Jacob Lawrence; and political activists like Marcus Garvey and James Johnson became famous not only in Harlem, but around the world.

This era of cultural proliferation became known as the Harlem Renaissance. A renaissance is a revitalization of intellectual or artistic achievement or a time of cultural and artistic change. The Harlem Renaissance represents a time when there was a great cohesiveness and solidarity within the African-American community. It was at this time that the National Negro Committee (later known as the NAACP), held its first meeting in New York City, the National Urban League, devoted to assisting African-Americans into urban life began, and the publications *The Crisis* and *Negro World* were unveiled.

In the 1920s, Prohibition spawned speakeasies, which cultivated a rich nightlife in Harlem. The Cotton Club became a popular spot for entertainment, but the black/white paradox remained. The Club launched the careers of black musicians, but was a segregated venue for “Whites Only.” Langston Hughes later wrote of the nightclub’s paradox: “White people began to come in droves... But I was never there, because the Cotton Club was a Jim Crow club for gangsters and monied whites.”

With the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression, blacks and whites alike struggled to find jobs and make ends meet. While Harlem continued to harvest talented African-Americans for at least another two decades, the Harlem Renaissance at its peak remains one of the inspirational and prolific eras in American history.

*Directions: Answer the following questions on a separate piece of paper using complete sentences.*

1. Many critics have said that reading literature which depicts a “less than attractive” view of African-American heritage only perpetuates a derogatory or demeaning view of blacks. Do you agree or disagree? What might be the point of reading a “less than attractive” portrayal of black history?
2. What factors made historians coin the term “Harlem Renaissance” for this era in black history?
3. What is the irony of the Cotton Club?