Jim Crow and the Great Migration

By Jonathan Holloway, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.06.16

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In 1881, Booker T. Washington became the head of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. The school educated African-Americans to be teachers, farmers and ministers. In September 1895, Washington gave a speech at the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition. He asked white employers to “cast down our bucket where you are.” He wanted them to hire southern African-Americans. Washington promised they would be a peaceful work force that would not cause trouble seeking more civil rights. As workers they would be "one as the hand" helping their white employers. Socially, blacks would be "as separate as the fingers."

Washington hoped that blacks would be allowed some freedom to find good jobs. He believed other civil rights could come later. For other black leaders, like W.E.B. Du Bois, who had just received his Ph.D. from Harvard University, this was unacceptable. They felt that blacks should demand full civil rights immediately.

In the 30 years since the Civil War ended, African-Americans experienced many changes. Of course, being freed from slavery was celebrated. However, what freedoms would blacks be given? Who could buy or sell property? Who could get married? Who could own firearms,
vote, get a job, receive an education or travel freely? For a little more than 10 years during Reconstruction, after the Civil War, blacks saw real opportunities. However, when northern armies left in 1877, everything changed and the era of Redemption began. These were the years when white Southerners returned to power. Redemption meant controlling black bodies, black minds and black opportunities. Much of this control took the form of so-called Jim Crow laws, which were town, city and state laws that demanded that whites and blacks must be segregated.

**What Plessy v. Ferguson did**

In 1896, the year after Washington’s Atlanta Cotton Exposition speech, the Supreme Court declared in Plessy v. Ferguson that "separate was equal" and segregation was constitutional. It would take 58 years for the Supreme Court to say that "separate was not equal" in the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision. For 58 years, African-Americans reorganized, educated themselves and learned small acts of protest. Much of this is seen in the history of the Great Migration, where blacks began to move from the fields in the South to the cities in the North.

The first black migration occurred between 1905 and 1930, but the much larger Great Migration was between the 1940s and early 1950s. For the first time in history there would be more blacks than whites in northern cities.
The reasons for the Great Migration were many. Opportunities for southern blacks to vote or hold office ended with the rise of Redemption. Finding work was more difficult and the quality of housing and education remained poor. Lynch law was everywhere. Mobs of whites took the law into their own hands. They sometimes punished or even killed black people. African-Americans could no longer protect their families.

There were many other reasons for moving north. Sharecropping, working for white farm owners, kept black families in debt. It was a dead end. Also, a type of beetle destroyed the cotton crops, so blacks lost their jobs. At the same time there were many jobs in northern factories. Blacks heard there was better housing, the right to vote and high-paying jobs in the North. Friends and family returned for visits or wrote letters about a better life up north. The Chicago Defender, a major black newspaper, was read in most southern black homes and was filled with stories about northern jobs.

Between 1910 and 1920, the black population in New York, Chicago and Detroit more than doubled.

More jobs, more problems

Most southern migrants ended up in Northern cities, but many others moved north more slowly. Some left the southern farm and settled in nearby Southern cities, while others found themselves in Kentucky coalfields. Many would stay for months at a time and then return home. Still others were brought North by labor agents who worked for owners of northern factories. The agents made money bringing blacks north. However, so many of these jobs were not worth having and many returned to the South.
Black migrants enjoyed more freedoms in the North, but life was far from easy. Black migrants who had come earlier sometimes resented the new migrants. They competed with them for jobs and homes. Apartment buildings built for five families were filled with 30 families. Often blacks were hired because white workers were on strike. Eventually the strike ended and whites went back to work, so blacks lost their jobs. This led to violence, too. In East St. Louis, striking white laborers attacked black workers that took their jobs. The police did nothing. Nearly 50 people died in the violence. An unknown number of others were killed. Their bodies were thrown into the Mississippi River and never found.

Increasing violence in cities

Violence against African-Americans was on the increase. For example, the Ku Klux Klan, which disappeared during Reconstruction, reappeared. This was directly related to the 1915 D.W. Griffith’s movie, "The Birth of a Nation," which was based on a novel about Reconstruction after the Civil War. It showed blacks as fools, fat servant women or rapists, and gave credit to the Klan for restoring southern pride. It was shown at the White House. President Woodrow Wilson admired the film. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) called it “three miles of filth.”
Not directly related to the film or the Klan were violent actions in cities across the country. After the race riot in East St. Louis in 1917, the NAACP organized a silent march down New York’s Fifth Avenue where ten thousand men, women and children marched to the beat of muffled drums from Harlem to the heart of Manhattan.

Two years later, black neighborhoods would come under attack in Chicago. There, the violence began when a black teenager was stoned to death by whites while he was swimming in Lake Michigan. Within hours, swarms of armed whites began to attack blacks who had moved into their neighborhoods. The governor called in the Illinois National Guard, but almost 40 people died and over 5,000 were injured. More than a thousand African-Americans lost their homes in the five days of violence. More than 25 cities experienced race riots in the summer of 1919.

**Emerging culture in the North**

Migrating north, African-Americans brought their art and way of life, too. African-American religion, music, story-telling and the arts became popular. Poets like Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, writers like Nella Larsen and Jean Toomer and artists like Aaron Douglas and Augusta Savage were emerging. Harlem in New York City became famous for its music, art and literature.

In the first 20 years of the 20th century, Booker T. Washington’s ideas about patiently waiting for civil rights changed. The NAACP, founded by Du Bois, challenged the laws that made blacks second-class citizens. Marcus Garvey, founder and leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), pushed for a return to Africa to start a new “black man’s empire.” Membership in these groups gave their members purpose and a feeling of belonging.

**Migration collapse**

The stock market crash of 1929 led to the collapse of the job market and the pace of northern migration slowed. However, many of the social and political challenges that led to the black exodus from the South remained in place. African-Americans found a new way of seeing the present world and imagining its future. The great Second Great Migration, beginning in the 1940s, and the legal triumphs of the civil rights era in the 1950s, all owed a debt to the changing political, social and cultural ideas that grew out of the earlier Great Migration.

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Quiz

1. Which of these sections provides multiple pieces of evidence that the enactment of Jim Crow laws in the South led to the Great Migration?
   
   (A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-3]
   (B) "What Plessy v. Ferguson did"
   (C) "More jobs, more problems"
   (D) "Increasing violence in cities"

2. Which of the following selections from the article BEST supports the idea that black leaders often disagreed on the best way to get civil rights?
   
   (A) Washington hoped that blacks would be allowed some freedom to find good jobs. He believed other civil rights could come later. For other black leaders, like W.E.B. Du Bois, who had just received his Ph.D. from Harvard University, this was unacceptable.
   
   (B) For a little more than 10 years during Reconstruction, after the Civil War, blacks saw real opportunities. However, when northern armies left in 1877, everything changed and the era of Redemption began.
   
   (C) For 58 years, African-Americans reorganized, educated themselves and learned small acts of protest. Much of this is seen in the history of the Great Migration, where blacks began to move from the fields in the South to the cities in the North.
   
   (D) In the first 20 years of the 20th century, Booker T. Washington’s ideas about patiently waiting for civil rights changed. The NAACP, founded by Du Bois, challenged the laws that made blacks second-class citizens.

3. Which statement would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
   
   (A) Some southern migrants ended up in nearby cities, while others stayed for months in Kentucky coalfields.
   
   (B) Though black migrants had more freedoms in the North, violence against blacks was on the rise in many cities.
   
   (C) Marcus Garvey, founder and leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, pushed for a return to Africa.
   
   (D) President Woodrow Wilson admired the film "The Birth of a Nation," which was based on a novel about Reconstruction.
4 How do the sections "Emerging culture in the North" and "Migration collapse" contribute to the central idea of the article?

(A) They explain the impacts and legacies that were left in place by the Great Migration.

(B) They connect the stock market crash of 1929 and the Second Great Migration.

(C) They describe how important art and literature in Harlem were to the people participating in the Great Migration.

(D) They show that many African-Americans were unable to leave the South until the Second Great Migration.