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The Second Great Migration

Read the text below.

About 4.3 million African Americans migrated out of the southern United States between 1940 and 1970, an exodus known as the Second Great Migration. The first Great Migration occurred when African Americans moved north in the first decades of the 1900s. These migrations followed an earlier movement north after the end of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, a period known as Reconstruction.

As Reconstruction ended near the end of the 19th century, many states in the South enforced Jim Crow laws. Called “separate but equal,” Jim Crow laws separated white people from black people—but the facilities were not equal.

African Americans were forced to attend inferior schools, sit in the balconies of movie theaters and in the backs of buses, and were refused service in many hotels and restaurants. People who complained about the laws were often harassed, beaten, or even killed. Across the South, an African American was hanged or burned alive—lynched—approximately every four days from 1889 to 1929.

African Americans went north to escape Jim Crow. They also sought better job opportunities. In the North, people were needed to work in factories during and after World War II. These jobs offered better wages and working conditions than were available in the South.

Three major rail lines defined the Second Great Migration. Where a person lived in the South usually determined where they ended up in the North. People from Arkansas and Alabama took the Illinois Central Railroad to Cleveland, Ohio; Chicago, Illinois; and Detroit, Michigan. People from Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia rode the Seaboard Air Line up the East Coast to Washington, D.C.; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Newark, New Jersey; and New York City, New York. People who lived in Texas or Louisiana took the Union Pacific rail line to Los Angeles and Oakland, California.

The Second Great Migration altered American industry and culture. Agricultural technology was forced to develop rapidly in the South as more African American farmworkers migrated north. By the 1950s, mechanical cotton pickers had almost entirely replaced human labor.

As more African Americans worked in factories, they joined trade unions. Industrial trade unions represent all workers in a factory or industry. Contracts between employers and workers reached through collective bargaining helped guarantee equal wages for white and black workers. This increased African Americans’ political, social, and economic influence.

Most African American children attended better schools than they had in the South. Just four years after arriving in the North, many did as well as Northern-born black children—and better than Southern children. Studies of the educational success of these pupils helped disprove the “separate but equal” idea and inform the landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*. This legal decision ended public school segregation on the basis of race.



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Date _____

The Second Great Migration, continued

The Second Great Migration radically altered the demographics of the United States. Many Northern whites did not welcome African Americans as neighbors and co-workers. Many resisted renting or selling houses to blacks, afraid that black people moving in would lower a home's property value.

Many white neighbors moved from neighborhoods and cities that welcomed black migrants. The phenomenon of white people moving at once from cities and into suburbs is known as "white flight."

African American migrants established thriving, independent communities. The vacant houses and disused land left behind by white flight drove down property values. This made it easier for lower-income black families to afford a home.

African American culture began to have an urban, rather than rural, identity. Prior to the Second Great Migration, most African Americans lived and worked in the agricultural industry. By 1970, more than 80 percent of the African American population lived in cities.

Increased job opportunities helped create a large African American middle class. Urban, industrial jobs were higher-paying and held more potential for promotion than agricultural labor. Cities that developed large African American populations saw a rise in black-owned businesses and black professionals, such as lawyers and doctors.

Many influential African Americans come from families that participated in the Great Migrations. Singers such as Aretha Franklin and Michael Jackson, writers such as Toni Morrison and August Wilson, sports legends such as Jesse Owens and Joe Louis, political figures such as Michelle Obama and Condoleezza Rice....These are just some of the people whose parents and grandparents migrated from the South to find a better life in northern cities.

Sources

Wilkerson, Isabel. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Random House, 2010.

World Book Encyclopedia. 2009.