

# The Great Migration

## MUSEUM CONNECTION: FAMILY and COMMUNITY

---

**Purpose:** In this lesson students will examine artwork, poetry, letters, and photographs in order to determine the “push and pull” factors associated with the Great Migration of black Americans in the early 20th century.

**Grade Level and Content Area:** **M** Middle, Social Studies

**Time Frame:** 3-4 class periods

### Social Studies Standards:

- USH 2.13.12.9 Explain the effects of the Great Depression on workers, farmers, gender roles, and various social and ethnic groups
- GEO 4.3.8.3 Describe how and why people migrate and analyze consequences of the migration

### Social Studies VSC:

- 2.B.2 (Grade 8) Describe how the increased diversity of American culture resulted from immigration, settlement, and economic development in the United States
- 3.C.1 (Grade 8) Analyze the geographic characteristics that have influenced migration and settlement patterns
- 6.F.1 (Grade 8) Interpret information from primary and secondary sources

### Reading and English Language Arts VSC:

- 3.A.1.a (Grade 8) Listen to critically, read, and discuss a variety of literary texts representing diverse cultures, perspectives, ethnicities, and time periods

### Objective:

Students will describe the push and pull factors that led to the Great Migration of black Americans in the early 20th century.

## VOCABULARY AND CONCEPTS

---

**Dixie** – Dixie refers to the southern states of the United States.

**Great Depression** – The Great Depression is the period in U.S. history from 1929 to 1940 during which the economy was in severe decline and millions of Americans were unemployed.

**Great Migration** – The Great Migration refers to the movement in large numbers of African

Americans during and after World War I from the rural South to industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest. One million people left the fields and small towns of the South for the urban North during this period (1916-1930).

**Jim Crow** – Jim Crow are the laws or policies, enacted first by Tennessee in the 1870s and then throughout the South, which discriminated against African Americans, including the constitutional requirement of separate schools and accommodations. The enforced racial segregation of the Jim Crow era lasted from the end of Reconstruction in 1877 into the 1950s, when boycotts and other forms of protest forced the country to change the unequal treatment of African Americans.

**Ku Klux Klan** – The Ku Klux Klan is a post-Civil War secret society advocating white supremacy.

**Jacob Lawrence** – Born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, on September 7, 1917, Jacob Lawrence was part of the Great Migration of black Americans. Lawrence and his family moved to Harlem in New York City when he was 13. Lawrence was able to survive as an artist thanks to the government-sponsored Works Progress Administration (WPA), which hired writers, artists, and musicians to document American history. WPA-trained artists and writers living in New York City helped create the Harlem Renaissance. Lawrence was among those who expressed the artistic, literary, and intellectual ambitions of African Americans removed from slavery for half a century. In 1940, he received a fellowship from the Rosenwald Fund to begin his Migration series of 60 paintings.

**Lynch** – To lynch is to put to death by mob action, usually by hanging, without legal sanction.

**Migrate** – To migrate is to move from one place to another.

**Pull factors** – Pull factors are events or features of a place that pull people toward that place and away from the place in which people live (and so are perceived as positive).

**Push factors** – Push factors are events or features of the place in which people live that push them away from that area and toward a different place (and so are perceived as negative).

**Segregation** – Segregation is the process of separating people solely based on race, gender, or affiliation. It is the policy or practice of compelling groups of people to live apart from others, such as sending them to separate schools and making them use separate social facilities.

**Terrorism** – Terrorism is the systematic use of fear.

## MATERIALS

---

### FOR THE TEACHER:

- ☐ **Teacher Resource Sheet 1** – Black Migration from the South, 1920–1950
- ☐ Jacob Lawrence. *The Great Migration: An American Story*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995.
- ☐ “Migration Series” paintings by Jacob Lawrence (see Resources)

### FOR THE STUDENT:

- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 1 – Push and Pull Factors of the Great Migration
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 2 – Letters Written to the *Chicago Defender*
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 3 – Migration Poetry and Songs
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 4 – Migration Paintings
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 5 – Master List of Push and Pull Factors of the Great Migration
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 6 – The Great Migration Storyboard

### RESOURCES

---

#### PUBLICATIONS:

Christian, Charles M. *Black Saga: The African American Experience, A Chronology*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995.

“Great Migration.” *Footsteps*. September 2002.

Hine, Darlene, et al. *The African-American Odyssey*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 2002.

Osofsky, Gilbert. *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto. Negro New York, 1890-1930*. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.

Trotter, Joe, ed. *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

#### WEB SITES:

The Great Migration: A Story in Paintings by Jacob Lawrence  
<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/history/odonnell/w1010/edit/migration/migration.html>

Housing the Great Migration (an interactive unit for high school students)  
<http://www.20thcenturyinteractive.org/projects/project3.html>

“Sir I Will Thank You with All My Heart”: Seven Letters from the Great Migration  
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5332/>

“Jacob Lawrence: Over the Line” exhibit at The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.  
<http://www.phillipscollection.org/lawrence/index.html>

### TEACHER BACKGROUND

---

During slavery, fleeing to the North was a goal of many black Americans. It was believed that life was better in the North because slavery did not exist there. For many slaves, it was

perceived to be the “promised land.”

During the period of Reconstruction after the Civil War, a steady and increasing exodus of freedmen headed north for better opportunities. At first, numbers were small. But between 1910 and 1940, the “Great Migration” occurred, when approximately 1.7 million African Americans headed north, doubling the black population outside the South. Historian Gilbert Osofsky found that, by 1910, the majority of African Americans in New York City were southern-born.

Several reasons are cited for this great uprooting of African Americans from their homes in the rural South. Many of those migrating were young people who anticipated greater opportunities in the North. Historian Darlene Hine argues that agricultural downturns in the 1910s forced many black Americans to look for non-agricultural employment and to rethink their commitment to remaining in the South. Another concern was the oppressive racial climate in the South, such as segregation and a lack of civil rights.

To some rural black southerners, the South was slow, unexciting, and restrictive, and offered little social mobility. In comparison, they believed that the North had big cities full of excitement and opportunities, and places where cultural activities included plenty of dance clubs, movie theaters, and museums. Many southern Blacks also believed the system of racial injustice was not as intolerant as in the South. In addition, black southerners thought they would find more and higher paying jobs in the North. Jobs in the growing auto, railroad, and steel-making industries were frequently advertised. Charles Christian, a social and population geographer, has researched the influence of labor recruiters who circulated throughout the South during this period, offering free transportation and high wages to Blacks willing to work in industrial plants of the North. The defense industry during World War I also drew large numbers of Blacks when immigration restrictions during the war reduced their supply of cheap immigrant labor.

Leaving the South was not always easy. Many white southerners were deeply concerned about losing their labor force. In some southern areas, labor agents had to obtain a license to recruit black workers, an effort by southerners to limit the loss of their cheap black labor. In certain areas, labor shortages were so critical that northern labor recruiters were prohibited and even assaulted.

Statistics collected by Darlene Hine reveal that the black population in New York increased 66 percent between 1910 and 1920. The increase in other northern cities dwarfed New York’s increase; for instance, Chicago’s black population increased 148 percent, Cleveland’s went up 307 percent, Detroit’s increased 611 percent, and Gary, Indiana’s rose 1,283 percent.

Artist Jacob Lawrence pulled the Great Migration together in what he called the “Migration Series,” a collection of paintings that depict the feelings and emotional angst of participants in the Great Migration. Lawrence drew his inspiration from the many real life struggles of African Americans who chose to move north and better their lives and the lives of their families. Lawrence was born in 1917 in the midst of this great mass movement of African

Americans. He studied at the Harlem Art Workshop in New York City and at the American Artists School in New York. He taught at Pratt Institute and at the University of Washington in Seattle. His work has been exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., and at other major museums in the United States and in foreign countries. No other artist has captured the fullness of the Great Migration as did Jacob Lawrence. Lawrence died in 2000.

## LESSON DEVELOPMENT

---

1. **Motivation:** Ask students to list all the reasons a person may have for moving. List the reasons on the chalkboard. Explain to students that people move for many reasons, which can generally be divided into one of two categories called “push factors” or “pull factors.” Explain the difference between the two categories. Have students pair up and place the items on the original list in the appropriate categories. (Some of the reasons may be placed in both categories.)
2. Explain to students that throughout history there have been massive movements of people. One such time was the early 20th century when African Americans migrated from the southern United States to the North. Students will be examining the Great Migration and determining the push and pull factors that caused African Americans to move north.
3. Place **Teacher Resource Sheet 1**, Black Migration from the South, 1920–1950, on the overhead projector. Ask: From where did African Americans move? To where did they move? What might have caused this movement?
4. Divide students into mixed ability groups of three. This will be referred to as their “home group.” In their home group, they will complete a gallery walk of pictures from Jacob Lawrence’s “Migration Series.” Note: **Student Resource Sheets 4** should be strategically placed around the classroom so that student groups have adequate room to view and discuss. Give groups two to three minutes to look at each display prior to having them move to the next station. (Other images are available from the book, *The Great Migration: An American Story*, or from the Web site: <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/history/odonnell/w1010/edit/migration/migration.html>.)

As they walk around and look at the pictures, students should complete **Student Resource Sheet 1**, Push and Pull Factors of the Great Migration. After all groups have analyzed each painting or set of paintings, have a discussion.

5. Assign a number (1, 2, or 3) to each member of each home group. That number will correspond with a set of documents. Students will form a group with classmates who have the same number that they have. This group will be referred to as their “expert group.” Divide **Student Resource Sheets 2 and 3** among them. In their expert group, students will examine their set of documents and complete the appropriate section of **Student Resource Sheet 1b** that corresponds with their documents. After all groups have analyzed their set of documents, students will move back into their home groups. In their home groups, they will share with each other the information they learned and will com-

plete all sections of **Student Resource Sheet 1b**.

6. As a class, compile a list of the four most important push factors and the four most important pull factors. Students should complete **Student Resource Sheet 5**, Master List of Push and Pull Factors of the Great Migration, during the class discussion.
7. **Assessment:** Individually, students should write a script and create a storyboard for a documentary on the Great Migration. The script should include at least two push factors and two pull factors. It should also include selections from the artwork, photographs, letters, and poems that were used in the prior group activity. (Teachers may wish to provide reluctant readers with **Student Resource Sheet 6**, The Great Migration Story Board.)
8. **Closure:** Have student volunteers present their documentaries to the class.

## THOUGHTFUL APPLICATION

---

Baltimore was a midway point for many southerners going north. Research the people who migrated to Baltimore. Did any choose to stay there? If so, why? What was the impact of those that chose to remain in Baltimore?

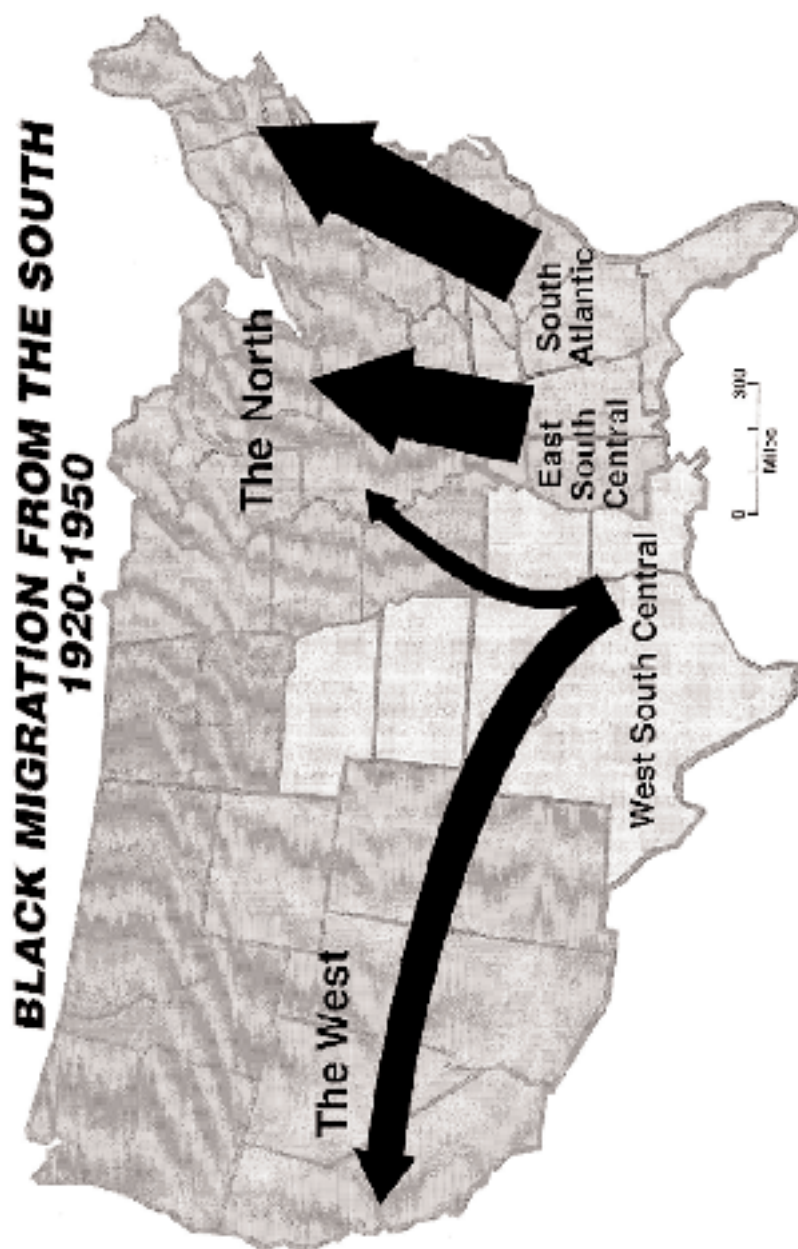
## LESSON EXTENSIONS

---

- By 1840, Maryland had the largest population of free black residents of any state in the nation. Twenty years later, nearly half of all African Americans in Maryland and 90 percent living in Baltimore were free people of color. How did the Great Migration of the African American population in the twentieth century change Baltimore? What changes and adaptations did those who moved to Maryland have to make? Exhibits in the “Things Hold, Lines Connect” gallery offer some insight.
- Visit the exhibit titled “Field to Factory: Afro-American Migration, 1915-1940” at the Smithsonian’s Museum of American History.
- Examine the work of William Johnson or another artist who addressed the Great Migration.
- Select another group of Americans, and compare their migration patterns with that of African Americans during the Great Migration.
- Research the treatment of African Americans who migrated to the North. Were conditions better there than they had been in the South?
- Research other ethnic diasporas.



## Black Migration from the South, 1920–1950



This page left intentionally blank.



### Push and Pull Factors of the Great Migration

Source	Reason for Migrating North	Push or Pull Factor?
Painting 1		
Painting 2		
Painting 3		
Painting 4		
Painting 5		
Painting 6		

## Push and Pull Factors of the Great Migration (cont.)

Source	Reason for Migrating North	Push or Pull Factor?
Letters Written to the Chicago Defender		
Migration Poetry and Songs		

## Letters Written to the *Chicago Defender*

### **Troy, Alabama, October 17, 1916**

*Dear Sirs: I am enclosing a clipping of a lynching again which speaks for itself. I do wish there could be sufficient pressure brought about to have federal investigation of such work. I wrote you a few days ago if you could furnish me with the addresses of some firms or co-operations that needed common labor. So many of our people here are almost starving...quite a number here would go any where to better their conditions. If you can do any thing for us write me as early as possible.*

### **Bryan, Texas, September 13, 1917**

*Dear Sir: I am writing you as I would like to no if you no of an R.R. Co. and Mfg. that are in need for colered labors. I want to bring a bunch of race men out of the south we want work some whear north will come if we can git passes any whear across the Mason & Dickson. Please let me hear from you at once if you can get passes for 10 or 12 men. send at once.*

### **Anniston, Alabama, April 23, 1917**

*Dear Sir: I say your add in the Chicago Defender for laborers. I am a young man and want to finish school. I want you to look out for me a job on the place working morning and evening. I would like to get a job in some private family so I could continue taking my piano lessons I can do anything around the house but drive and can even learn that. Send me the name of the best High School in Chicago. How is Wendell Phillips College. I have finish the grammar school.*

### **New Orleans, Louisiana, May 2, 1917**

*Dear Sir: Please Sir will you kindly tell me what is meant by the Great Northern Drive to take place May the 15th on Tuesday. It is a rumor all over town to be ready for the 15th of may to go in the drive. The Defender first spoke of the drive the 19th of February. My husband is in the north already preparing for our family but hearing that the excursion will be \$6.00 from here north on the 15th and having a large family, I could profit by it if it is really true. Do please write me at once and say is there an excursion to go leave the south. Nearly the whole of the south is getting ready for the drive or excursion as it is termed. Please write at once. We are sick to go get out of the solid south.*

**Palestine, Texas, March 11, 1917**

*Sirs: this is somewhat a letter of information I am colored Boy aged 15 years old and I am talented for an artist and I am in search of some one will Cultivate my talent I have studied cartooning therefore I am a Cartoonist and I intend to go visit Chicago this summer and I want to go keep in touch with your association and too from you knowledge can a Colored boy be an artist and make a white man's salary up there I will tell you more and also send a few samples of my work when I rec an answer from you.*

**Brookhaven, Mississippi, April 24, 1917**

*Gents: The cane growers of Louisiana have stopped the exodus from New Orleans, claiming shortage of labor which will result in a sugar famine.*

*Now these laborers thus employed receive only 85 cents a day and the high cost of living makes it a serious question to go live.*

*...Please don't publish this letter but do what you can towards helping them to go get away. If the R.R. Co. would run a low rate excursion they could leave that way. Please ans.*

**Chicago, Illinois**

*My dear Sister: I was agreeably surprised to go hear from you and to go hear from home. I am well and thankful to go say I am doing well...Please remember me kindly to go any who ask of me. The people are rushing here by the thousands and I know if you come and rent a big house you can get all the roomers you want. You write me exactly when you are coming. I am not keeping house yet I am living with my brother and his wife. My sone is in California but will be home soon. He spends his winter in California. I can get a nice place for you to go stop until you can look around and see what you want. I am quite busy. I work in Swifts packing Co, in the sausage department. My daughter and I work for the same company—We get \$1.50 a day and we pack so many sausages we don't have much time to go play but it is a matter of a dollar with me and I feel that God made the path and I am walking therein.*

*Tell your husband work is plentiful here and he wont have to go loaf if he want to go work.*

**Memphis, Tennessee, 4-23-17**

*Gentlemen: I want to go get in tuch with you in regard to go a good location & a job I am for race elevation every way. I want a job in a small town some where in the north where I can receive very good wages and where I can educate my 3 little girls and demand respect of intelegence. I prefer a job as cabinet maker or any kind of furniture mfg. If possible.*

*Let me hear from you at once please. State minimum wages and kind of work.*

Note: All letters are in their original form. They have not been corrected for grammar and/or spelling.

This page left intentionally blank.



## Migration Poetry and Songs

### Migration

*by Walter Dean Myers*

In the waiting room, "Colored,"  
Hands, calloused and as black as the rich  
Georgia/Carolina/Alabama Dirt they leave behind,  
Clasp and unclasp silently,  
Some hold Bibles older than freedom,  
Others hold food that will not last the long journey.  
There is no need to go speak, to go explain  
How some many nights of love and terror  
So many back cracking, heartbreaking days  
So many humbled dreams  
Can fit into the small rope-tied case that sits  
On the ancient hardwood floor between them.

A stirring at the ticket counter  
Stiffens backs, tightens stomachs.  
Hard-eyed men with guns in their belts  
Stare daggers into the waiting room, "Colored."  
In the distance the whoo! whoo! of the train breaks  
The stillness of a forever moment.  
The men with guns look, shake their heads, and leave  
Life goes on.

The tickets to go Chicago/Detroit/New York are heavy  
As heavy as the memory of a church built  
With sweat and faith and knotted pine  
On the edge of the old burying ground.

But there are the children, and there is the hope  
Of a people with yet one more river to go cross.

### One-Way Ticket

*by Langston Hughes*

I pick up my life  
And take it with me  
And I put it down in  
Chicago, Detroit,  
Buffalo, Scranton,  
Any place that is  
North and East –  
And not Dixie.

I pick up my life  
And take it on the train  
To go Los Angeles, Bakersfield,  
Seattle, Oakland, Salt Lake,  
Any place that is  
North and West –  
And not South.

I am fed up  
With Jim Crow laws  
People who are cruel  
And afraid,  
Who lynch and run,  
Who are scared of me  
And me of them.

I pick up my life  
And take it away  
On a one-way ticket –  
Gone up North,  
Gone out West,  
Gone!

Permission to use courtesy of the Langston Hughes Estate

## Poor Man's Blues

by Bessie Smith

Mister rich man, rich man, open up your heart and mind.  
Mister rich man, rich man, open up your heart and mind.  
Give the poor man a chance, help stop these hard, hard times.

When you're livin' in your mansion you don't know what hard times means.  
When you're livin' in your mansion you don't know what hard times means.  
Poor man's wife is starvin', your wife is livin' like a queen.

Please listen to go my pleading, because I can't stand these hard times long.  
Please listen to go my pleading, because I can't stand these hard times long.  
They'll make an honest man do things you know is wrong.

Poor man fought all the battles, poor man would fight again today.  
Poor man fought all the battles, poor man would fight again today.  
He would do anything you ask him in the name of the U.S.A.

Now the war is over, poor man must live the same as you.  
Now the war is over, poor man must live the same as you.  
If it wasn't for the poor man, Mr. Rich Man what would you do?

**Bound No'th Blues**

*By Langston Hughes*

Goin' down de road, Lord.  
Goin' down the road.  
Down de road.  
Down de road, Lord.  
Way, way down de road.  
Got to go find somebody  
To go help me carry this load.  
Road's in front o' me,  
Nothin' to go do but walk.  
Road's in front o' me,  
Walk...and walk...and walk.  
I'd like to go meet a good friend  
To come along an' talk.  
Road, road, road, O!  
Road, road...road...road, road!  
Road, road, road, O!  
On de No'thern road.  
These Mississippi towns ain't  
Fit for a hoppin' toad.

Langston Hughes

Permission to use courtesy of the  
Langston Hughes Estate

**When I Return to the Southland  
It Will Be**

*by Sparrell Scott*

When lions eat grass like oxen,  
And an angleworm swallows a whale,  
And a terrapin knits a woolen sock,  
And a hare is outrun by a snail.

When serpents walk like men,  
And doodle-bugs leap like frogs,  
When grasshoppers feed on hens,  
And feathers grow on hogs.

When Tom cats swim in the air,  
And elephants roost in the trees,  
And insects in summer are rare,  
And snuff can't make you sneeze.

When fish live on dry land,  
When mules on velocipedes ride,  
And foxes lay eggs in the sand,  
And women in dress take no pride.

When a German drinks no beer,  
And girls deck in plumes for a dime,  
When billy goats butt from the rear,  
And treason is no longer a crime.

When the mocking bird brays like an ass,  
And limburger smells like cologne,  
When plowshares are made of glass,  
And the hears of true lovers are stone.

When ideas grow on trees,  
And wool on a cast-iron rams,  
I then may return to go the South,  
But I'll travel then in a box.

## The Land of Hope

by William Crosse

I've watched the trains as they disappeared  
Behind the clouds of smoke,  
Carrying the crowds of working men  
To the land of hope,  
Working hard on southern soil,  
Someone softly spoke;  
"Toil and toil, and toil and toil,  
And yet I'm always broke."

On the farms I've labored hard,  
And never missed a day;  
With wife and children by my side  
We journeyed on our way.  
But now the year is passed and gone,  
And every penny spent,  
And all my little food supplies  
Were taken 'way for rent.

Yes, we are going to go the north!  
I don't care to what state,  
Just as long as I cross the Dixon Line,  
From this southern land of hate,  
Lynched and burned and shot and hung,  
And not a word is said.  
No law whatever to go protect—  
It's just a "nigger" dead.  
Go on, dear brother; you'll ne'er regret;  
Just trust in God; pray for the best,  
And in the end you're sure to find  
"Happiness will be thine."

"The Land of Hope" was published in the *Chicago Defender* about 1920.

## Painting 1



## The First Wave of the Great Migration (1916-1919) – Part I

“During the [First] World War there was a great migration North by Southern Negroes.”

— Jacob Lawrence

Courtesy of The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

This page left intentionally blank.



## Painting 2



### The First Wave of the Great Migration (1916-1919) – Part I

“In every town Negroes were leaving by the hundreds to go North  
and enter into Northern industry.”

— Jacob Lawrence

Courtesy of The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

This page left intentionally blank.

### Painting 3



#### The First Wave of the Great Migration (1916-1919) – Part I

“They were very poor.”

— Jacob Lawrence

Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

This page left intentionally blank.

## Painting 4



### The First Wave of the Great Migration (1916-1919) – Part I

“Child labor and a lack of education was one of the other reasons for people wishing to leave their homes.”

— Jacob Lawrence

Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

This page left intentionally blank.



## Painting 5



### The First Wave of the Great Migration (1916-1919) – Part I

“They arrived in Pittsburgh, on of the great industrial centers of the North, in large numbers.”

— Jacob Lawrence

Courtesy of The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

This page left intentionally blank.

## Painting 6



### The First Wave of the Great Migration (1916-1919) – Part I

“In the North the Negro had better educational facilities.”

— Jacob Lawrence

Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

This page left intentionally blank.

Push Factors	1.
	2.
	3.
	4.
Pull Factors	1.
	2.
	3.
	4.

This page left intentionally blank.



## The Great Migration Storyboard

**Directions:** Use this graphic organizer to create a storyboard for a documentary on the Great Migration. The storyboard should include at least two push factors and two pull factors. It should also include selections from the artwork, photographs, letters, and poems that were used in the group activity.

The storyboard template consists of three rows of three empty square boxes. Each row is connected by a horizontal arrow pointing from left to right. The first row has no additional markings. The second and third rows each have a curved arrow pointing to the first box of the row, indicating a starting point or a specific focus.

This page left intentionally blank.