Narrated by a Mississippi barber and a sharecropper woman who organized migration clubs to Chicago, *Up South* tells the dramatic story of African-American migration to industrial cities during World War I. Letters, oral histories, songs, photographs, and art convey how southern black culture and traditions helped sustain migrants as they rejected the oppression and indignity of the Jim Crow South. But the migrants encountered new problems and challenges in the “promised land.” Among the issues and events explored are the rise of black politics, women’s club and church activities, the July 1919 race riot, the industrial workplace, and the emergence of the “New Negro” movement.

Visit the ASHP website for more information:
www.ashp.cuny.edu
Up South and nine other documentaries are a part of the Who Built America? series, which explores the central role working women and men played in key events and developments of American History. See also the two-volume Who Built America? textbook, Freedom’s Unfinished Revolution, a high school text on the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the WBA? interactive CD-ROM.

Complete list of WBA? documentaries:

**History: The Big H**— This film-noir detective story introduces the history of working people and the challenge of understanding the past.


**Daughters of Free Men**— Lucy Hall leaves her New England farm to work in the Lowell textile mills of the 1830s and confronts a new world of opportunity and exploitation.

**Five Points**— The story of 1850s New York City and its notorious immigrant slum district, the Five Points, is seen through the conflicting perspectives of a native born Protestant reformer and an Irish-Catholic family.

**Doing As They Can**— A fugitive woman slave describes her life, work, and day-to-day resistance on a North Carolina cotton plantation during the 1840s and 1850s.

**Dr. Toer’s Amazing Magic Lantern Show**— The struggle to realize the promise of freedom following the Civil War is told by ex-slave J.W. Toer and his traveling picture show.

**1877: The Grand Army of Starvation**— In the summer of 1877 eighty thousand railroad workers went on strike and hundreds of thousands soon followed. The Great Uprising began a new era of conflict about equality in the industrial age.

**Savage Acts: Wars, Fairs and Empire**— The story of the Philippine War (1899-1902) and turn-of-the-century world’s fairs reveal the links between everyday life in the U.S. and the creation of a new expansionist foreign policy.

**Heaven Will Protect the Working Girl**— Framed by the 1909 New York shirtwaist strike, this program presents a panoramic portrait of immigrant working women in the turn-of-the-century city.

**Up South: African-American Migration in the Era of the Great War**— Narrated by a Mississippi barber and a sharecropper woman, Up South tells the dramatic story of African-American migration to industrial cities during World War I.
In the early decades of the twentieth century, hundreds of thousands of African Americans left the rural South and traveled hundreds of miles to make new homes for themselves in Northern cities. The “Great Migration” continued for decades and eventually involved millions of people, becoming the largest internal migration in American history. In *Up South*, Clara Robinson and Robert Horton represent the “ordinary” people who helped lead a movement that transformed African-American life and shaped twentieth century American history.

*Up South* explores this important event from Robert and Clara’s point of view. It looks at the communities and traditions African Americans built in the South after the Civil War and highlights the ways those experiences affected the Great Migration and African-American life in the North. It explores the economic and political conditions—including segregation, inequality, and injustice—that encouraged the migration. Most of all, it shows the ways that people like Clara and Robert took action, transforming their lives as they headed for the “Promised Land.”

The Robert Horton character in *Up South* was a real person, a barber from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, who moved to Chicago in 1917. Interviewed by sociologist Charles Johnson, Horton talked about his role in the Great Migration. Clara Robinson is a composite character, based on the lives of many African-American women who played key roles in mobilizing their families for the move North.

Robert and Clara’s stories help us understand what it was like to take part in the Great Migration and build new lives. Through them, we can see how the actions of individuals can influence others, build mass movements, and bring about profound change in the history of an entire nation.
Black people began migrating within the Americas soon after the first Africans were brought to these shores as captives. For 200 years of enslavement, running away was a form of resistance; a way to break free. Yet after the Civil War, most African Americans deepened their roots in the soil, seeking farmlands in the South.

From 1600 to the present, African Americans struggled for social and political freedom. They survived centuries of slavery to find new hope in the 1860s and 1870s, the years of Emancipation and Reconstruction. In these years, despite the hostility of former masters, African Americans took advantage of freedom to build homes, churches, and farms. Hungry for education, they created thousands of schools and went to college to become teachers and lawyers. They won citizenship rights and elected sheriffs, mayors, and congressmen.

These gains were limited, however. The Ku Klux Klan attacked black politicians, businessmen, and teachers throughout Reconstruction. By the late 1870s the period of advance was over. Though the Klan had declined, other racist groups spread lynching and violence throughout the South. White-controlled southern legislatures passed “Jim Crow” laws enforcing the segregation of the races. In 1893, in Plessy v. Ferguson, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that such laws were constitutional. As the century ended, southern states blocked African Americans from voting and forced them to accept second-class treatment.
In the 1890s, most African Americans labored in the southern cotton economy. Some owned their own farms, but many worked in a system called sharecropping. Landlords provided sharecroppers with land, a cabin, farm tools, and cotton seed; in return, the sharecroppers gave the landlord part (usually 50 per cent) of the crop. Landlords often cheated tenants, who were forced into growing debt. For some tenants, sharecropping seemed almost as bad as slavery.

Despite this oppression, African Americans in the South built strong communities centered on church and family. Black-owned businesses and institutions took root in some southern cities. Some African Americans held onto their farms and passed them along to their children. They also created social clubs and “juke joints” to enjoy music and dance. Nurturing a culture rich in faith, music, and mutual support, African Americans refused to give in to racial prejudice and violence. Their culture and institutions helped them survive, and shaped the new communities they would build in the North.

In 1900 the South faced social and economic challenges. Weakened by the Jim Crow system, bound to cotton and the sharecropping economy, the South entered the Industrial Age decades after the rest of the country. As a region, the South lagged behind in levels of education, manufacturing, and health. Its economic stability still rested on agriculture, and even that took a beating when floods and destructive insects called boll weevils devastated farms across the South. In this context, many African Americans renewed their search for new opportunities.

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**Timeline**

- **1863**: Emancipation Proclamation ends slavery in the South
- **1871**: KKK violence prompts congressional inquiry
- **1878**: 20,000 African-American “Exodusters” move to Kansas
- **1893**: Plessy v. Ferguson ratifies Jim Crow
- **1898**: Spanish-American-Philippine War
- **1900**: Chicago has 40,000 African-American residents
- **1910**: World War I spurs Great Migration
- **1919**: Race riots nationwide
- **1920**: Chicago’s African-American population reaches 110,000
- **1925**: Publication of *The New Negro* by Alain Locke
- **1940-1960**: Second wave of African-American migration
One Way Ticket
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!
—LANGSTON HUGHES

When Europe and much of the globe plunged into the First World War, African-Americans confronted a new situation. As the southern economy worsened and racial violence spread, new opportunities appeared in the North. Many African Americans gave up their dream of independent farms and left the land they had lived on for generations.

World War I spurred an economic boom in the U.S. Bustling factories and steel mills needed new workers. Yet the war had almost entirely halted immigration from Europe. Factory owners looked for a new work force. In cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and New York, opportunities opened for African Americans willing to move North and take difficult but higher-wage industrial jobs.

Many African-American southerners heard about such jobs through African-American newspapers such as the Chicago Defender. These newspapers suggested that northern cities offered not only new jobs, but also greater freedom, better schools, and more political rights. Robert Horton was a Defender reader. He made a good living as a barber, but resented Mississippi laws barring him from politics. Horton read in the Defender that African Americans in Chicago could “elect whom they wished.” He began to circulate the Defender in his barbershop and soon mobilized a group of 40 neighbors who would support each other in migrating to Chicago.

Meanwhile, women like Clara Robinson played key roles, organizing church-based “migration clubs” that helped many to go North. These women had long nurtured their families, built communities, and sustained their churches and social organizations. Now, in the migration clubs, women exercised organizing skills: sharing news, planning their journeys, and helping each other prepare for and actually make this difficult move.

“My dear Sir: I take great pleasure in writing you. As I found in your Chicago Defender this morning where you secure job for men as I really didn’t know if you can get a good job for me as a woman and a widow with two girls... [sic].”

Segregated waiting room in Union Terminal, Jacksonville, Florida, 1921.
Soon hundreds of thousands of African Americans were riding the trains, heading North. As the Great Migration spread, however, some white southerners grew alarmed. The migration threatened the South’s economy. Plantation owners who depended on African-American labor did all they could to discourage the movement. Some raised wages as an incentive to stay. Southern newspapers often ran headlines reporting racial violence in the North: “Whites Mob Negroes in Jackson Park.” Some African-American migrants were forcibly removed from trains by police or railroad officials.

The migration also sparked debate among African Americans. Some, such as Booker T. Washington, the president of Tuskegee Institute, felt African Americans should stay in the South and seek progress by relying on the land and technical training. But others agreed with scholar W.E.B. DuBois, a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), who argued that black people should go North and strive for full political and economic equality. “The North is no paradise,” said DuBois, “but the South is at best a system of caste and insult and at the worst a Hell.”

While leaders debated, the migration clubs continued their work. Letters from the first wave of migrants encouraged others to follow. Between 1914 and 1918, more than 500,000 African Americans headed North; more than 50,000 African Americans arrived in Chicago alone. Stepping off the train in Chicago, African Americans found themselves in a world of new opportunities and old problems.

Consider this: DuBois was a descendant of free blacks in the North; Washington was the descendant of slaves in the South: how might this have influenced their opposing positions?

Black women’s clubs helped mobilize for the migration. In the North, many became the nucleus of women’s voting clubs.

Smith/Shively Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations
Those who joined the Great Migration, like Robert and Clara, arrived in a strange new world. Most southerners had lived on farms or in small towns, surrounded by nature; now they entered the largest cities in the country. Most had worked the soil, growing rice or cotton; now they confronted a mechanized world where crops and other raw materials were made into products. The harsh northern winters symbolized the difficulties for many migrants. Yet many migrants also found new jobs, greater freedom, and the excitement of city life. As one migrant wrote in a letter, “There is something to see here, all the time.”

As the twentieth century began, the modern American city came to dominate national life. In cities such as New York, Chicago, and Cleveland, electricity lit homes and streets, and a new entertainment, the movies, drew crowds. As skyscrapers rose, subways and elevated trains rushed people through the city. Advertisements, ready-made fashions, and commercial sports competed for new mass markets. Beginning in the 1880s, a new wave of immigrants filled the streets with strange foods and languages. Chicago, the nation’s second largest city, was home to immigrants from Ireland, Poland, Lithuania, Italy, and Russia, as well as native-born Americans.

Like many northern cities, Chicago had a small African-American population with pre-Civil War roots. In 1900, Chicago’s black residents were dispersed throughout the city. Some were middle-class, working as businessmen, teachers, ministers, and storeowners. Between 1910 and 1920, as the Great Migration swept north, Chicago’s African-American population grew from just over 40,000 to nearly 110,000. Between 1920 and 1930, it more than doubled again. Some members of the established African-American community welcomed the new migrants from the South. Others saw the new arrivals as threats to their own hard-won rights and respectability.
Many southern-born African Americans were impressed that Chicago did not practice the legal segregation common in the South. On streetcars and sidewalks, blacks and whites jostled side-by-side. Schools in Chicago were not only integrated, they had more books and resources than those in the South. Perhaps most importantly, new arrivals found work in Chicago’s meatpacking houses and steel mills. Wages for industrial jobs were high, especially compared to those of the agricultural South. The work was demanding but allowed many migrants to live differently than they ever had before.

Life in northern cities was not without problems. The influx of African Americans unsettled many whites. Racism was widespread in the North, though it was rarely enshrined in the law. African Americans faced limited choices in housing, and many were forced into deteriorating tenements. This new form of segregation reminded migrants like Robert and Clara of the discrimination they had hoped to leave behind.

Despite these problems, most migrants stayed. They built new lives and new institutions, drawing on the strong sense of family and mutual support that had marked their lives “down home.” Some shared what little they had for the common good of all. Black northerners organized to help the newcomers adapt, and the southerners offered black business people a new market to serve. Together they built new African-American communities in Chicago and cities throughout the North.

“Ald boy, I was promoted on the first of the month. I was made first assistant to the head carpenter. When he is out of the place I take everything in charge and was raised to $95 a month. You know I know my stuff.... I should have been here 20 years ago. I just begin to feel like a man. It’s a great deal of pleasure in knowing that you have some privilege.”

—CHICAGO MIGRANT WRITES TO MISSISSIPPI, 1917
African Americans who joined the Great Migration hoped to escape the racist violence of the South, but they met new tensions in the North. They worked side-by-side with whites and sat beside them in classrooms, but racial resentments and persistent notions of white supremacy poisoned interracial relationships. In the crowded cities, competition for housing and jobs heightened these tensions, which sometimes became violent.

In Chicago, blacks and whites worked together in the meatpacking plants, but racial tensions limited interracial union organizing. Managers often pitted black and white workers against one another. Black workers knew that unions often ignored their needs except during strikes, when bosses would try to hire them as “scabs,” or replacement workers. Nevertheless, many African-American workers hoped that unity with white laborers could help them make economic gains. In early 1919, an organizing drive in the meatpacking plants brought in 6,000 African-American workers, strengthening the union’s ability to fight for higher wages and better working conditions.

However, 1919 was also marked by nationwide racial violence. As World War I ended, white gangs went on violent rampages from Washington, D.C., to Omaha, Nebraska, and other cities where the African-American presence had grown.

"Arm yourselves now with guns and pistols....You may be victims in Chicago within a fortnight of such murders and outrages as have taken place in East St. Louis. And when trouble starts let us not hesitate to call upon our Negro militiamen to defend us....Protect yourselves."
—FERDINAND BARNETT, 1919

Jobs in the meatpacking industry attracted black and white workers.
In July 1919, Chicago suffered a terrible riot. An African-American teenager swimming in Lake Michigan floated into a “white” area, and drowned after being stoned by a white crowd. Violence spread rapidly. Black Chicagoans, including World War I veterans, fought back. By the riot’s end, 23 people were killed and more than five hundred injured. Afterwards, racial tension spread and black membership in Chicago unions declined.

In the 1920s, continuing white hostility gave new life to the Ku Klux Klan. Previously confined to the South, the Klan moved north and added Catholics and Jews to their list of enemies. A major film, Birth of A Nation (which,ironically, pioneered many modern filmmaking techniques), glorified the Klan’s role during Reconstruction, encouraging its growth. The NAACP protested the film and succeeded in having it banned in Chicago; but the film drew record crowds elsewhere.

Migrants also faced tensions within the African-American community. Conflicts between migrants and native black Chicagoans reflected their different economic interests. Long-time African-American residents sometimes looked down on the newcomers as crude country people who gave all African Americans a bad name. As new arrivals created social clubs and churches that reflected southern styles, earlier residents criticized migrants for lacking a proper sense of restraint.

Because of discrimination, African Americans of all social and economic classes had to live in the same neighborhoods. Doctors, preachers, and teachers were neighbors with manual and domestic laborers, street hustlers, and hucksters. African-American neighborhoods were divided by differences in lifestyle and culture; ultimately, however, the sense of common identity and interest that had carried African Americans through slavery and Jim Crow helped them live and work together for equality and better lives.

Consider this:
Racial and ethnic tension was often heightened by competition for jobs, money and resources. Do we face this problem in American cities today?

A Series of cartoons by Leslie Roger published in the Defender in the 1920s. What do these images reveal about the everyday relationship between recent arrivals and long-time residents of the city’s African-American Community?

Chicago Defender, July 9, 1921
**THE “NEW NEGRO”**

The Great Migration of the World War I years opened the way for on-going migration and nurtured a renaissance in African-American life. As migration continued in the 1920s, urban African-American communities grew in size, organizing new institutions and gathering new resources. Facing the challenges of racism and urban life, African Americans responded with new cultural and political energy.

African-American life in the North was sharply affected by World War I. Many African Americans saw the war as a chance to show the nation they deserved equal rights. Almost 300,000 African Americans served during World War I. But military life was stained by bias and segregation. Some African Americans fought under French command, earning respect in key battles. Others were affected by the experience of living among Europeans, who regarded them not as outcasts but as human beings. When African-American veterans returned, they spoke out against lynching, segregation, and other forms of racism.

“Supporters of Marcus Garvey parade in Harlem during a 1920 U.N.I.A. Convention.”

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations
The bold spirit of returning veterans helped spark a new mood in African-American communities. Alain Locke, the first black Rhodes scholar, described a “new spirit...awake in the masses.” Locke wrote about the changing sensibility and edited *The New Negro*, an anthology of African-American writers. In Locke’s view, a “New Negro” had emerged, willing to settle for nothing less than equal rights, human treatment, and active involvement in politics, business, and the arts.

This new energy made itself felt in different areas of life, including electoral politics. Across the North, African Americans used their right to vote. In Illinois and other states where women could vote, African-American women played key roles as voters and organizers. Adelbert H. Roberts became the first African American since Reconstruction to join the Illinois legislature. Oscar De Priest was the first northern African American to serve in the U.S. Congress. These elected officials helped to ensure the African-American community a measure of political recognition.

Grassroots politics also flourished. The NAACP championed African-American equality in the courts. Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey created the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which built pride in African heritage, encouraged economic independence, and called for a return to Africa. Though few left for Africa, many urban African Americans embraced Garvey’s message of empowerment and pride. Meanwhile, working-class African-American women and men built the churches, social clubs, and political organizations that gave their community strength and stability.

The migration also revitalized American arts and culture. The growth of the urban African-American population opened the way for the growth of jazz, America’s greatest contribution to world culture. Chicago played a major role in the jazz world. Musicians such as King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, and Bessie Smith created a vibrant musical art form. Meanwhile, poets and writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston wrote brilliantly about the African-American experience.

Harlem, the destination for many African-American migrants to New York City, became a symbol of this artistic and intellectual rebirth, which some called the “Harlem Renaissance.” Urban culture offered African-American musicians, artists, and writers opportunities to cultivate their creative gifts. Publishing companies, theater owners, and patrons of the visual arts began recognizing African Americans as world class creative artists. Together, African-American artists, writers, and musicians highlighted their heritage and explored the meaning of African-American life in the new urban America.
The 1920s brought increased visibility for African-American artists. The growth of urban black communities and increased interracial support for African-American artists enabled a new generation of artists to create and promote new images of African-American life, which often contrasted sharply with those found in the popular media.

Black artists such as Edmonia Lewis and Henry Ossawa Tanner had been active in the 19th century. But the migration and the bold political and social spirit of the 1920s sped the emergence of a new generation of African-American artists who created new images and interpretations. Sculptors, painters, and photographers such as Meta Warrick Fuller, James Van Der Zee, and Archibald Motley, Jr., gained prominence for their work portraying the history and everyday life of African-American communities.

Painter, illustrator, and muralist Aaron Douglas was one of the most important artists of the 1920s, and is the visual artist most often associated with the Harlem Renaissance. Born in Topeka, Kansas, in 1899, Douglas moved to Harlem in 1925. In flat, angular forms and highly-stylized silhouette figures, Douglas integrated African art influences with geometric modern art forms to present a new visual representation of African-American culture. His subject matter included biblical scenes, historical events, and the life of African-American farmers and laborers. Douglas’s later works took the form of dramatic public murals that introduced the cycles of African-American life and history to a larger public audience.

Consider this:
What figures do you see in Douglas’s painting? How did his technique address the “New Negro” philosophy of the 1920s?
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Scholarly Works


Literature

Attaway, William, *Blood on the Forge* (1941) A classic of migration-themed fiction, this story about three brothers forced to leave the South focuses on the harsh realities of their lives in the North.

Wright, Richard, *Black Boy* (1945) This autobiography chronicles Wright’s childhood in Mississippi before migrating to Chicago in the mid-1920s.

-----, *American Hunger* (1977) Published posthumously, this book picks up from the end of *Black Boy*, detailing Wright’s new life in Chicago.

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The cover image in the *Up South* logo is a quilt designed by Ruth Clement Bond in 1934 while her husband was an administrator of the Tennessee Valley Authority. The quilt, *Lazy Man*, was executed by wives of employees of the TVA, the federal agency that brought electric power to rural areas.

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