

“To the Promised Land”: A Symposium on the African-American Migration to Springfield, Massachusetts, 1898 – 1945

Grades: High School, 9 – 11 (depending on what year U.S. History II is taught)

Time Allotment: Varies depending on the school schedule and objectives of the teacher. I envision this as a local case study for a unit on the homefront during World War II, even though the actual time span of the materials ranges from 1914 to 1945. Since this is a directed research activity that culminates in a class symposium where students will present their research findings, I would expect students to spend time working on it both in and out of class.

Curriculum Areas: History

Rationale: Migration is one of the fundamental themes in historical study, whether it concern the movement of people, animals, plants, technology, or ideas. Scholars usually discuss human migration/immigration in terms of “push/pull” factors, with the former referring to forces that compel people *to move from* a particular place and the latter referring to forces that attract people *to move to* a particular location. From the late 19th century through World War II, millions of African-Americans moved from the south to the “promised land” of the North. Pushed by Dixie’s oppressive Jim Crow racial caste system and a collapse in the cotton market, pulled by the promise of jobs in the factories of the Midwest and Northeast, black Americans packed up their belongings and rode the railroads north to a new “promised land.” This internal population shift has come to be known as the “Great Migration.”

Although Chicago, Detroit, New York and other large industrial/commercial cities were the destination points for the vast majority of black southern migrants, Springfield, Massachusetts also experienced growth in its small, but significant, African-American community. One of the leading attractions Springfield had to offer these new arrivals was employment in the federal Armory, especially during the second World War. A critical point for students to understand is the complexity of the experience lived by African-Americans once they migrated north.

Goal: The goal of this unit will be for students to answer the essential question: Were Springfield and the Armory a “promised land” for African-Americans in the Great Migration?

Objective: Students will read and analyze primary sources such as an academic study, community sociological reports, and newspaper articles to assist them in formulating and supporting a thesis that answers the essential question for the unit.

Massachusetts Curriculum Framework Standards:

USII.9 Analyze the post-Civil War struggles of African Americans and women to gain basic civil rights

USII.13 Explain how the Great Depression and the New Deal affected American society

USII.17 Explain important domestic events that took place during the war

Materials:

pen or pencil

notebook

computers that can access the following website:

http://www.cesd.umass.edu/springfield_armory_1892-1945

Procedure:

Introduction

1. If your class textbook has a section on “The Great Migration,” ask students to read and take notes on it for class the next day. If your class text does not discuss this topic, consider photocopying “The Great Migration” entry in *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African-American Experience*, edited by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. This reference work provides a cogent introduction to this critical topic in United States history.
2. Begin class the next day by reviewing the basic information of “The Great Migration.” How many African-Americans migrated between 1892 and 1945? Why (push and pull forces) did they move north? How did they travel out of the south? Where did they settle in the north? Why was this migration historically significant?
3. Stress to students that African-Americans moved north in hopes of reaching a new “promised land.” Ask the students what “promised land” means in general and what it probably meant for African-Americans in the early 20th century. Write their answers on the board.
4. Ask students if they think the north ended up being a promised land for black Americans. Answers to that question should vary, which then provides an opportunity for the teacher to point out to students that multiple historians can study the same event from the past with the same question(s) in mind, yet come up with different interpretations of that event and different answers to those question(s). That’s what history is, a constant reinterpretation of the past
5. Ask students how historians interpret events and answer questions about the past. Define primary sources for the students and inform them that these sources are the evidence upon which historians base their interpretations of the past. Point out to students that the primary source record of an event always leaves gaps and raises conflicts in the interpretation of that event, so historians use logical inferences to fill those gaps and offer the best interpretation of an event.
6. Inform students that they are going to be sorted into teams of historians researching different aspects of the Springfield African-American community between 1914 and 1945: Population & Housing; Employment; Politics &

Community Organizations; Education; Crime, Disease & Mortality; Life and Work during World War II.

7. Ask students what kind of evidence and data would indicate that black American life was improving in:

Population and Housing (*increased population, more homeownership, evidence of decreasing discrimination, etc.*)

Employment (*improved employment opportunities, decreasing unemployment, increased presence in skilled and professional jobs, increased creation of businesses, etc.*)

Politics and Community organizations (*more African-Americans elected to office, increased voter registration and turnout, increased membership in fraternal and social organizations*)

Education (*increased enrollment in schools, improved schools, hiring of more black educators and administrators, etc.*)

Crime, Disease & Mortality (*decreased crime rate, decreasing rates of contagious diseases, improved life expectancy rate, etc.*)

Life & Work during World War II (*stronger enforcement of anti-discrimination laws such as the FEPC, increased employment at the Armory and local businesses, improved occupational opportunities, etc.*)

Group Research

8. Before you break students into groups, inform them that the primary sources they will be working with are a college research paper, church funded sociological reports, and newspaper stories. Point out to students that all primary sources have strengths, shortcomings, and biases; ask them what might be the strengths, shortcomings, and biases in each of these sources. Write their answers on the board and tell them that this will be relevant to the final writing assignment for this project.
9. Divide the class into six heterogeneous groups, one for each of the categories in step 6. The size of each group will depend on the number of students in the class; the ideal size of a group would be approximately 4 to 5 students.
10. Assign a category to each group and inform them that they will be going to http://www.cesd.umass.edu/springfield_armory_1892-1945 to research primary sources that contain historical evidence for their specific category. Each group will have multiple primary sources to study, so the students should divide the workload equitably. Finally, as they conduct their research they should look for evidence that addresses the indicators listed in step 7.
11. Once they get to the website, the Housing, Employment, Politics, Education, and Crime groups should research *The Springfield Negro, the St. John's Study of 1922*, and *the St. John's Study of 1940* for evidence that helps them answer the essential question. The remaining group should research the *Dunbar*

Records of 1941, 1942, 1944, and 1945 as well as the *Springfield Daily News* articles of 1943 and 1944.

12. As they research their respective primary source(s), each person should record evidence, making sure to note where the evidence was located.
13. Once every person in a group is done conducting research, the group should reconvene and compile their findings into one report, which they will turn into the teacher.

Culminating Activities & Assessment

14. The teacher should compile the six group reports into a whole class master report, which she or he will photocopy for each student in the class.
15. Then each group should stand-up in front of the class and review their findings, not by reading off word for word what is in the packet, but by highlighting what the group thinks was the most important evidence. Students should be encouraged to ask questions during this process.
16. Finally, students should be assigned to write a paper that answers the essential question of the unit: *Were Springfield and the Armory a “promised land” for African-Americans in the Great Migration?*
17. Alternative Assessment: The teacher could have the students create a visual product, such as a poster, Powerpoint presentation, or documentary, that answers the essential question.