

CHICAGO AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

Over the past century, African Americans have emerged from the shadows to claim their place in Chicago's sun. Before World War I, blacks in Chicago lived in several neighborhoods and made up a small proportion of the city's residents. The Great Migration of the late 1910s and 1920s changed their inconspicuous presence as thousands of African Americans arrived from the south in search of new jobs and freedoms. At best, the white population reacted to these migrants with tolerance, but more often, with hostility as exemplified in the 1919 riot. Segregation and restrictive covenants hemmed middle-class blacks into circumscribed areas and the poor were forced to live in substandard housing where landlords took brownstones and cut them up into tiny kitchenette apartments. Despite this treatment, African Americans in Chicago made *segregation into congregation* (to borrow a phrase from the historian Earl Lewis) by creating their own businesses, commercial areas, art venues, and churches, social and political organizations. Then, in the Depression decade, working-class blacks helped found industrial unions and their collective actions made strikes, boycotts, and marches respectable means to demand first-class citizenship. All of this activity amounted to a feeling of proud industriousness among many blacks on the South Side of Chicago. Indeed, by the 1940s, social scientists Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake would call Chicago the "Black Metropolis."

Beginning in the 1940s, an even greater migration of African Americans to Chicago occurred. The collapse of the southern farm tenant system and war-time jobs in northern industries caused them to head north for the "Promised Land." What they found was even less appealing than the earlier migrants: segregated neighborhoods, overcrowded schools, widespread job discrimination, and city officials and politicians who seemed to care more about delivering the black vote in their areas than about the people who lived within them. A new expressway built in the 1950s divided white and black neighborhoods and served as a symbol of a larger government supported racism. Public housing, despite the work of some dedicated public servants, became largely segregated and under-funded. Blacks moving into previously all-white neighborhoods faced intimidation and violence, and when African Americans remained steadfast in their right to live anywhere, whites fled. Other black Chicagoans who often worked just as hard remained impoverished. By the 1980s, deindustrialization, suburbanization, and a crisis in the public schools contributed to the emergence of high crime rates and blighted neighborhoods.

Yet the history of African-Americans in Chicago over the second half of the 20th century is one of achievement and struggle as well as oppression. African Americans helped organize strong integrated unions in both the industrial and service sectors that demanded anti-discrimination policies, seniority, better hours, and job mobility. Increasing numbers of black college graduates added to a growing middle class that moved to suburbs or middle-class neighborhoods (due to their successful fight against restrictive covenants). Activists led grassroots community efforts that directly confronted racism and fought for access to better jobs, education, housing, and fair treatment by the city's police, aldermen, and courts. Elected political power grew as well: while some black politicians joined the Democratic machine, others maintained their independence, formed caucuses, and advanced a progressive agenda. Some tried to do both. Eventually, in 1984, citizens elected the first black major of Chicago, Harold Washington, who opened up the city for all Chicagoans.

Although many scholars have analyzed the complex history of African Americans in the city, much of the story still remains in the shadows. History Fair students can bring these stories to light and address topics that will help explain how black Chicagoans built and sustained communities, confronted challenges, and helped shape the political, economic, and cultural history of the city.

Topic Questions:

These questions are designed to spark research into important historical questions. Once students begin to do their research, they will want to form a preliminary thesis—their argument—and then investigate deeper. **Note: sources listed offer suggestions for *beginning* research. For full citations of works mentioned, see the select bibliography.**

I. POLITICS

1. How did black Chicagoans relate to the Republican political machine of the 1920s?

See: Branham, Drake and Cayton, Grossman, Spear, Thompson, and Travis. See also: select files from Illinois Writer's Project (IWP) of the Vivian G. Harsh Collection, Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Chicago Public Library (finding aid online)

2. What circumstances and efforts caused blacks to switch in Chicago from the Republican to the Democratic Party?

See: Bates, Branham, Drake and Cayton, Grimshaw, Reed, Strickland, Travis.

3. What opportunities existed for black candidates to break from the Democratic political machine? What gains did black politicians make by working within the Democratic patronage system? Choose an era or politician to make an in-depth study.

See: Black, Branham, Calvel and Wiewel, Cohen and Taylor, Depres, Drake and Cayton, Grimshaw, Reed, Wright.

4. What are the cultural and organizational roots of the political insurgence that resulted in the election of Harold Washington in 1983 and reelection in 1987?

See: Black, Branham, Calvel and Wiewel, Chicago Public Library bibliography on Washington, Cohen and Taylor, Depres, Eyes on the Prize II "Back to the Movement", Grimshaw, Rivlin, and Travis. The Harold Washington papers are available at the Harold Washington Library Center, Special Collections.

II. LABOR

1. What jobs were available to blacks during the Great Migration? Why did the Stock Yards Labor Council fail?

See: Chicago Commission on Race Relations, Cohen, Grossman, Halpern, Needleman, Spear, Strickland, Tuttle.

2. What professions did blacks create within their own communities before the Great Depression? How did these professions influence class relations among Chicago blacks?

See: Black, Drake and Cayton, Reed, Strickland, Spear, Nathan Thompson, Travis.

3. How and why did blacks begin to join labor unions again in the 1930s? Pick a particular industry (steel, packing, taxicabs, transit, railroad workers, musicians, building trades workers, etc.) and study the racial, class, and gender dynamics of the company and unions over time.

See: Bates, Cayton, Drake and Cayton, Halpern, Needleman, Strickland. See also: find the archival papers on microfilm for the union you wish to analyze. Contact the Illinois Labor Historical Society to get other source leads.

4. How did black women earn a living in Chicago? Did they have similar gender roles to their white counterparts? Choose a particular era or employment field to analyze.

See: Bates, Brooks, Drake and Cayton, Venkatesh, Wells. See also: check the Chicago History Museum catalogue and Vivian Harsh collection for papers on domestic workers (Neva Ryan tried to organize a union in the 1930s), policy, prostitution, and industrial work, settlement houses, etc.

5. What influence did deindustrialization have on Chicago's African American population?

See: Black, Jackson, Lemann, Reynolds, Venkatesh, and Wilson.

III. CIVIL RIGHTS

1. What strategies did civil rights groups like the NAACP and Urban League pursue during the Great Migration?

See: Grossman, Spear, Ottley, Reed, and Strickland. See also: look for primary source material in the Chicago Defender and The Negro in Chicago (Commission Report on 1919 Riot).

2. What influence did Marcus Garvey and other black nationalists have on African Americans in Chicago? How did Garveyites challenge elite notions of race and colorism?

See: Look for secondary literature on Garvey, Drake and Cayton See also: entries on black nationalism in Illinois Writer's Project (IWP) of the Vivian G. Harsh Collection, Carter G. Woodson Center, Chicago Public Library.

3. How did the Depression and World War II reorient civil rights agencies and tactics blacks used to demand freedoms in Chicago?

See: Bates, Branham, Lizabeth Cohen, Drake and Cayton, Kersten, Stange, Reed, Strickland, Wright. See also: Chicago Defender, Midwest Daily Record, March on Washington Movement materials at Harsh Collection of Chicago Public Library

4. How did the Cold War influence black activism in Chicago?

See: Mary Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000) for the national perspective. For the local perspective, you will need to search the Chicago Defender and Chicago Tribune and other primary sources.

5. How did black Chicagoans react to the southern civil rights movement? What issues did they pursue in the North in the 1950s and 1960s?

See: Danns, Farmer, Ralph, Reed, and Strickland. See also: papers of Congress of Racial Equality and Student Non-Violent Coordinating committee for Chicago chapters-microfilm is available at the Harsh Collection

6. To what extent did Martin Luther King's presence among Chicago civil rights groups change their approach?

See: Cohen and Taylor, Eyes on the Prize II (episode on King in Chicago), Ellis, and Ralph.

7. How did the Black Panther Party and other black nationalist groups in the 1960s and 1970s promote civil rights? Did their agenda align with other liberal civil rights groups?

See: Chicago Riot Study, Ellis, Eyes on the Prize II (episode concerning Fred Hampton), Hampton (check for pamphlets at Northwestern and other special collections). See also: United States. District Court (Illinois: Northern District : Eastern Division), Report of the January 1970 grand jury on police shootings of Black Panthers.

IV. THE LAW AND THE ILLICIT ECONOMY

1. What place did policy and gangsters have on black Chicagoans from the 1910s to the 1940s? Why did illegal activities flourish?

See: Mumford, Thompson, Travis, and Malcolm X. See also: articles on the Jones brothers and policy in Chicago Defender and Chicago Tribune.

2. What role have gangs played historically in Chicago 's South and West Side neighborhoods?

See: Chicago Riot Study, Dawley, Perkins, Sale, Venkatesh, Wilson See also: The Chicago Gang History Project of University of Illinois at Chicago: www.uic.edu/orgs/kbc/Rooms/chiroomnew.html

3. How have the police viewed the black community in Chicago? How have they protected or exacerbated racial conflicts, especially during the riots of 1919 and 1968? Choose one historical period or event, and analyze in detail

See: Riot reports from 1919 and 1968, Drake and Cayton, Eyes on the Prize II (episode concerning Fred Hampton), Jackson and Jackson, Nathan Thompson, and Venkatesh.

V. CULTURE AND LEISURE

1. What role has religion played for black Chicagoans politics, communities, and identities? Choose a single era and/or religious branch.

See: Drake and Cayton, Forrest, Chicago 1966, Grossman, Muhammad Speaks, Ralph, and Malcolm X. See also: Drake's study of black churches Vivian G. Harsh Collection, Carter G. Woodson Center, Chicago Public Library (index online)

2. To what extent did Chicago's African American community experience a cultural Renaissance in the 1930s and 1940s? How did this arts movement differ from the earlier and more famous Renaissance in 1920s Harlem?

See: Brooks, Drake and Cayton, Wright. See also: Robert Bone, "Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance," Callaloo 28 (Summer, 1986), 446-468.

Visit the Du Sable museum and exhibit on Chicago writers at the Carter Woodson Library (until June 2005) as well as the Illinois Writer's Project (IWP) of the Vivian G. Harsh Collection, Carter G. Woodson Center, Chicago Public Library (index online).

3. How did Jack Johnson and Joe Louis represent or defy black notions of leadership and masculinity during their respective reigns as boxing champions?

*See: Ward and look for secondary sources on Louis
See also: Chicago Defender, Chicago Bee*

4. What cultural activities did blacks promote in the 1930s and 1940s? Pay special attention to lectures, scholarship, art shows, and Negro history week celebrations produced during this era.

See: *Brooks, Burns, Drake and Cayton, Miller, Mullen, Travis, and Wright*. See also: sources on Joe Louis, *Chicago Defender* articles, and try to request an interview with foremost expert, Dr. Margaret Burroughs, Director of the Du Sable museum, on the subject.

5. How did Chicago-style jazz develop in the 1920s? To what extent did this music move across the color line? Who produced the music, what venues hosted it, and who made money from it?

See: *Burns (episodes on 1920s Chicago) Dance, Kenney, and Travis*. See also: try to find information on the black musicians' Local 208 and visit the Chicago Jazz archive at the University of Chicago.

6. How did a distinct style of Blues develop in Chicago? What themes did this music address, in what neighborhoods did it flourish, and who promoted this music?

See: *Cockliss, Rich Cohen, Dube, Eastwood, Flerlage and Day, Grazian, PoKempner, and Williams and Zaritsky*. See also: CDs and biographies of Chicago blues artists.

7. How and why did the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musician chart a new course for black cultural politics in late-1960s Chicago?

See: <http://aacmchicago.org/> and check with the Chicago Jazz archivist at the University of Chicago for other sources.

8. Does Chicago need a black entertainment district to revive its previous cultural achievements? If so, how should this be accomplished?

See: *Black, Grazian, and Travis*.

See also: Jeff Huebner, "Whose Blues Will They Choose?," *Chicago Reader* December 1, 2000

You will need to conduct interviews and search for recent newspaper articles for this project.

VI. HOUSING, NEIGHBORHOODS, AND COMMUNITIES

1. What black communities existed before World War I and how did Chicagoans think about race during the 19th and early 20th century?

See: *Reed, Grossman, Spear, Thompson-Peters*.

2. Who enforced restrictive covenants in Chicago? How did black Chicagoans break through these restrictions in the courts and the neighborhoods from the 1910s to the 1940s?

See: *Black, Drake and Cayton, Grossman, Hirsch, Reed, Spear, Strickland, and Wright*. See also: court documents related to the *Hansberry v. Lee* decision and articles in *Chicago Defender*

3. How did the development of public housing in Chicago create new opportunities and problems for Chicago's black citizens from the 1940s to 1970s? How did Chicago Housing Authority's (CHA) policies on race change over time? Why did many white ethnics resist integrated housing?

See: *Cohen and Taylor, Hirsh, Kotlowitz, Lemann, Venkatesh, and Wilson*. See also: *WBEZ Chicago Matters* series on public housing (in the archive at wbez.org).

4. How did the spread of the black population in Chicago from Bronzeville to points further south and west change African American communities? Pick a single neighborhood and study its transitions.

See: *Black, Ellis, Hirsh, Pattillo-McCoy, and Wilson*.

5. How did blacks interact with whites in Chicago 's neighborhoods? Pick a particular neighborhood (Back of the Yards, Lawndale, South Shore, Gage Park, Near West Side) and analyze how the color line worked in practical terms (between blacks and Poles, Italians, Irish, Jews, etc.) during an era of frequent contact.

See: *Black, Chicago Commission, Drake and Cayton, Eastwood, Ellis, Grossman, Guglielmo, and Hirsch*.

See also: *papers from particular neighborhoods and community organizations from archives at Chicago Public Library and Chicago History Museum*. For example, Lawndale would include papers of Rabbi Marx, the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, and the Greater Lawndale Conservation Community at the Chicago History Museum will provide a window into these relationships.

For More on Chicago's African-American neighborhoods, see "The Labor Trail: Chicago's History of Working-Class Life and Struggle" www.labortrail.org.

- Vivian Harsh Collection at the Woodson Regional Library, CPL holds the manuscripts and papers and archives of individuals and organizations, Illinois Writers Project, Chicago Defender and other Chicago/national African-American newspapers available on microfilm
- Claude Barnett/Associated Negro Press papers available at Harsh & Chicago Historical
- Chicago History Museum holds the Irene McCoy Gaines Papers, Earl Dickerson scrapbooks, and archives from organizations
- Chicago Public Library holds the Harold Washington Papers and neighborhood collections

- Essay and Topics Questions prepared by Erik S. Gellman, Assistant Professor of History, Roosevelt University

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