

# The Harlem Renaissance

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Trumpeter, bandleader and singer Louis Armstrong was an important innovator of early jazz and the Harlem Renaissance. Photo from the Library of Congress.

It was the 1920s and time for a cultural celebration.

African-Americans had endured centuries of slavery and the struggle to do away with it. But, the end of slavery had not brought the equal treatment that many had envisioned.

Instead, white supremacy was quickly, legally and violently restored in the southern part of the United States, where 90 percent of African-Americans lived.

Starting in about 1890, African-Americans migrated to the North in great numbers. This Great Migration eventually relocated hundreds of thousands of African-Americans from the rural South to the cities of the North.

Many discovered they had shared common experiences in their past histories and their uncertain lives of the present. Instead of wallowing in self-pity, they ignited an explosion of cultural pride. This time period when African-American culture was reborn in New York City in the 1920s is known as the Harlem Renaissance.

## **African-Americans hope for a better life in the North**

The Great Migration began because of a "push" and a "pull." African-Americans had lived as slaves and then, as free people, they faced segregation. Hate groups and hate crimes cast alarm among African-American families of the Deep South. The promise of owning land had not materialized. Most blacks toiled as sharecroppers trapped in an endless cycle of debt, where they had to rent farmland from landowners, and then give a share of their crops to the landowner on top of the rent they paid. In the 1890s, insects damaged the cotton crops throughout the region, increasing the despair.

All these reasons pushed African-Americans to seek better lives. Many hoped for a new life up in the North. Jobs in many industries were numerous, and factory owners wanted sources of cheap labor.

Unfortunately, northerners did not welcome African-Americans with open arms. White people treated black people unfairly in the North, too. White workers complained that African-Americans were flooding the job market and lowering wages. Most new migrants found themselves segregated and living in run-down neighborhoods. The largest of these was the uptown New York City neighborhood of Harlem. Though poor, Harlem also had an educated class who made Harlem a center of culture.

## **Writers capture the spirit of the times**

In the Harlem scene, writers, actors, artists and musicians glorified African-American traditions. At the same time, they created new cultural forms.

One of the most famous writers of the Harlem Renaissance was Langston Hughes. Hughes cast off the influences of white poets. Instead, he wrote in a style of blues and jazz.

Other writers were important in the scene. Claude McKay and Jean Toomer wrote plays, short stories and poems to capture the spirit of the times. Book publishers soon took notice and patronized many of these talents.

Zora Neale Hurston was noticed quickly with her book "Their Eyes Were Watching God." Hurston used the music and stories that she collected as an anthropologist to write her stories, plays and books.

## **Musical comedies gain popularity**

Meanwhile, musical comedies became popular. The production of the musical "Shuffle Along" is sometimes credited with initiating the movement. Eubie Blake was an important composer of the Harlem Renaissance, and was one of the creators of "Shuffle Along." This show was written and produced by African-Americans. It opened in New York in 1921 to great success. Actor and singer Paul Robeson electrified audiences with his stage performances. He was a strong supporter of political causes, and his performance tours and activism took him around the world.

More than just a movement of writers, Harlem was also home to activism. Harlem was the base of Marcus Garvey and his movement to encourage blacks to move to Africa to escape racism. The magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), *The Crisis*, was published in Harlem, featuring the writing of many of the writers of the time, including

Langston Hughes. Famous historian W.E.B. DuBois was the editor of *The Crisis*, and a father figure to young Harlem writers.

### **Jazz music takes off**

Jazz music of the Harlem Renaissance shaped America and the entire world. Jazz was different than other music of the times because of its rhythms, instruments and improvisation.

Thousands of city dwellers flocked night after night to see the same performers. The musicians improvised as they played so that no two performances would ever be the same. Harlem's Cotton Club showed off big-band jazz musician Duke Ellington. Singers such as Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday popularized blues and jazz singing. Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong drew huge audiences as white Americans as well as African-Americans caught jazz fever.

The continuing hardships faced by African-Americans in the Deep South and cities in the North were severe.

But Harlem brought together some of the greatest minds of the day. The artists of the Harlem Renaissance transformed African-American culture. But the effects on all of America was equally strong. For the first time, white America could not look away.

## Quiz

- 1 Fill in the blank.
- The article MAINLY explains the impact of the Harlem Renaissance by .....
- (A) describing the location and appearance of Harlem.
  - (B) describing the different artists and art forms that emerged.
  - (C) explaining its long-term effects on American culture in detail.
  - (D) explaining the workings of the economy in the Deep South.
- 2 Which sentence from the article BEST supports a central idea?
- (A) African-Americans had endured centuries of slavery and the struggle to do away with it.
  - (B) Though poor, Harlem also had an educated class who made Harlem a center of culture.
  - (C) Actor and singer Paul Robeson electrified audiences with his stage performances.
  - (D) Thousands of city dwellers flocked night after night to see the same performers.
- 3 Which option is an accurate summary of the section "African-Americans hope for a better life in the North"?
- (A) Discrimination and segregation in the South caused African-Americans to travel North for better lives during the Great Migration. They found they were treated poorly in the North as well, and created a center of culture in Harlem.
  - (B) Many African-Americans were doing well with sharecropping in the South until insects damaged all the cotton crops in the region. Tired of farming, they traveled North during the Great Migration to look for factory jobs.
  - (C) The Great Migration began because of unfair laws and treatment for African-Americans in the South. It led many African-Americans to travel to New York City, where they were welcomed and given jobs with good pay.
  - (D) Harlem became an important destination for African-Americans during the Great Migration because it was a center for culture. Soon, job markets and wages in other neighborhoods and cities had to compete with Harlem for workers.
- 4 What is the MOST LIKELY reason why the author included information about Marcus Garvey and the NAACP magazine *The Crisis*?
- (A) to explain that many black people wanted to move to Africa after the Harlem Renaissance
  - (B) to describe the relationship between the magazine's editor and Langston Hughes
  - (C) to support the idea that activism was also an important part of the Harlem Renaissance
  - (D) to emphasize that writers were the most important and influential artists at the time