Harlem Renaissance

After the American civil war, liberated African-Americans searched for a safe place to explore their new identities as free men and women. They found it in Harlem. Read on to find out how this New York neighborhood became home to some of the best and brightest minds of the 20th century, gave birth to a cultural revolution, and earned its status as "the capital of black America."

**The Great Migration**

[](http://www.biography.com/tv/classroom/images/history/thegreatmigration.jpg)

The end of the American Civil War in 1865 ushered in an era of increased education and employment opportunities for black Americans. This created the first black middle class in America, and its members began expecting the same lifestyle afforded to white Americans. But in 1896, racial equality was delivered a crushing blow when the Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court case declared racial segregation to be constitutionally acceptable. This created even harsher conditions for African-Americans, particularly in some Southern states that sought to minimize the equality that former slaves and their descendants might aspire toward. The South also became gradually more and more economically depressed as boll weevils began to infest cotton crops. This reduced the amount of labor needed in the South.

As a result, blacks began to head to the Northern United States by the millions. Racism, while still a serious obstacle, was considered much less brutal there than in the South. In addition, the North granted all adult men with the right to vote; provided better educational advancement for African-Americans and their children; and offered greater job opportunities as a result of World War I and the industrial revolution. This phenomenon, known as the Great Migration, brought more than seven million African-Americans to the North.

**Harlem: The Black Mecca**



Housing executives planned to create neighborhoods in Harlem designed specifically for white workers who wanted to commute into the city. Developers grew overambitious, however, and housing grew more rapidly than the transportation necessary to bring residents into the downtown area. The once exclusive district was abandoned by the white middle-class, and frustrated developers were forced to cope with lower purchase prices than they first anticipated. White Harlem landlords started selling their properties to black real estate agents such as Philip A. Payton, John E. Nail, and Henry C. Parker. They also began renting directly to black tenants.

Meanwhile, the re-development and gentrification of midtown pushed many blacks out of the Metropolitan area. As a result, African-Americans began moving to Harlem en masse; between 1900 and 1920 the number of blacks in the New York City neighborhood doubled. By the time the planned subway system and roadways reached Harlem, many of the country's best and brightest black advocates, artists, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals had situated themselves in Harlem. They brought with them not only the institutions and businesses necessary to support themselves, but a vast array of talents and ambitions. The area soon became known as “the Black Mecca” and “the capital of black America.”

**The Harlem Renaissance**



During the early 1900s, the burgeoning African-American middle class began pushing a new political agenda that advocated racial equality. The epicenter of this movement was in New York, where three of the largest civil rights groups established their headquarters.

Black historian, sociologist, and Harvard scholar, [W. E. B. Du Bois](http://www.biography.com/people/web-du-bois-9279924) was at the forefront of the civil rights movement at this time. In 1905 Du Bois, in collaboration with a group of prominent African-American political activists and white civil rights workers, met in New York to discuss the challenges facing the black community. In 1909, the group founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), to promote civil rights and fight African-American disenfranchisement.

At this same time, the Jamaican-born [Marcus Garvey](http://www.biography.com/people/marcus-garvey-9307319) began his promotion of the “Back to Africa movement.” Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL), which advocated the reuniting of all people of African ancestry into one community with one absolute government. The movement not only encouraged African-Americans to come together, but to also feel pride in their heritage and race.

The National Urban League (NUL) also came into being in the early 20th century. Founded by Ruth Standish Baldwin and Dr. George Edmund Haynes, the fledgling organization counseled black migrants from the South, trained black social workers, and worked to give educational and employment opportunities to blacks.

Together, these groups helped to establish a sense of community and empowerment for African-Americans not only in New York, but also around the country. In addition, they provided a rare opportunity for whites to collaborate with black intellectuals, social activists, educators, and artists in an attempt to transform a largely segregated and racist American society.

Instead of using more direct political means to achieve their goals, African-American civil rights activists employed the artists and writers of their culture to work for the goals of civil rights and equality. Jazz music, African-American fine art, and black literature were all absorbed into mainstream culture, bringing attention to a previously disenfranchised segment of the American population. This blossoming of African-American culture in European-American society, particularly in the worlds of art and music, became known as The Harlem Renaissance

**Culture Comes Together**



One of the first notable events of the Renaissance came shortly after the NUL began publishing Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life. Believing that art and literature could lift African-Americans out of their situation, the magazine’s editor, Charles S. Johnson, began printing promising black writers in each issue. During Johnson’s work for Opportunity, he met [Jessie Fauset](http://www.biography.com/people/jessie-fauset-9292341), the literary editor for Du Bois’ NAACP magazine, Crisis. Fauset told Johnson about her first novel, There Is Confusion (1924), a story about middle class black women.

In 1924, Johnson organized the first Civic Club dinner, which was planned as a release party for Fauset’s book. The party was an instant success, and served as a forum for emerging African-American artists to meet wealthy white patrons. The party managed to launch the careers of several promising black writers, including poets [Langston Hughes](http://www.biography.com/people/langston-hughes-9346313) and [Countee Cullen](http://www.biography.com/people/countee-cullen-38950).

In 1925, shortly after the success of the Civic Club dinner, the magazine Survey Graphic, produced an issue on Harlem. Edited by black philosopher and Howard University professor, [Alain Locke](http://www.biography.com/people/alain-leroy-locke-37962), the magazine featured work by prominent black writers of the time period.



The magazine published work by writers Cullen, Hughes and Fauset, as well as poet [Claude McKay](http://www.biography.com/people/claude-mckay-9392654) and novelist [Jean Toomer](http://www.biography.com/people/jean-toomer-37322). Later that year, Locke expanded the special issue into an anthology called The New Negro. The collection fueled America’s growing interest in African-American writers, pushing black artists to the literary forefront.

African-American fine artists such as [Aaron Douglas](http://www.biography.com/people/aaron-douglas-39794) and Charles Alston also got their start through Alain Locke and Charles Johnson, who started publishing the artists’ works as illustrations and cover art. Pulled into the spotlight, these fine artists used their fame as an opportunity to delve into the themes they found problematic to American culture. By introducing the “exoticizing” of Africa and notions of “the primitive” to white America, African-American artists had their first opportunity to explore how these ideas could be used for and against their race.

**The Jazz Age**



With the conclusion of WWI came an end to wartime frugality and conservation. In an era of peace, Americans experienced an economic boom, as well as a change in social morays. Nicknamed “The Roaring 20s” for its dynamic changes, the decade became known for its celebration of excess and its rejection of wartime ideologies. Americans also began investing more time and money in leisure activities and artistic endeavors.

Around this same time, Congress ratified the Prohibition Act. While the amendment did not ban the actual consumption of alcohol, it made obtaining it legally difficult. Liquor-serving nightclubs, called “speakeasies” developed during this time as a way to allow Americans to socialize, indulge in alcohol consumption, and rebel against the traditional culture.

One of the best speakeasies in Harlem was the Cotton Club, a place that intended to have the look and feel of a luxurious Southern plantation. To complete the theme, only African-American entertainers could perform there, while only white clientele (with few exceptions) were allowed to patronize the establishment. This attracted high-powered celebrity visitors such as [Cole Porter](http://www.biography.com/people/cole-porter-9444679), [Bing Crosby](http://www.biography.com/people/bing-crosby-9262159) and [Doris Duke](http://www.biography.com/people/doris-duke-9542083) to see the most talented black entertainers of the day. Some of the most famous jazz performers of the time - including singer [Lena Horne](http://www.biography.com/people/lena-horne-9344086), composer and musician [Duke Ellington](http://www.biography.com/people/duke-ellington-9286338), and singer [Cab Calloway](http://www.biography.com/people/cab-calloway-9235609) - graced the Cotton Club stage.

Attending clubs in Harlem allowed whites from New York and its surrounding areas to indulge in two taboos simultaneously: to drink, as well as mingle with blacks. Jazz musicians often performed in these clubs, exposing white clientele to what was typically an African-American form of musical entertainment. As jazz hit the mainstream, many members of older generations began associating the raucous behavior of young people of the decade with jazz music. They started referring to the 20s, along with its new dance styles and racy fashions, as “The Jazz Age.”

**The End of the Renaissance**



As the 20s came to a close, so did white America’s infatuation with Harlem- and the artistic and intellectual movements surrounding it. The advent of The Great Depression also crushed the wild enthusiasm of “The Roaring 20s,” bringing an end to the decadence and indulgence that fueled the patronage of Harlem artists and their establishments.

The depression hit the African-American segment of the population hard; layoffs and housing foreclosures shut many blacks out of the American Dream that previously seemed so close at hand. The increased economic tension of the Depression caused black leaders to shift their focus from arts and culture to the financial and social issues of the time.

In addition, the strained relationship between the black community and the white shop-owners in Harlem finally tore the two groups apart in 1935. That alienation was expressed in the Harlem Riot of 1935, the nation’s first modem race riot. The resulting violence finally shattered the notion of Harlem as the “Mecca” for African-Americans, and broke the fleeting truce between white and black America.

While the Renaissance as a historical movement was over, the effects it had on modern society were far from finished. The artistic and political movements of the 20s would live on in American culture in the form of new musical expression, award-winning writing and, most importantly, the civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s. These events, and the role Harlem would continue to play after the Renaissance, would change the American cultural landscape forever.