GREAT MIGRATION & THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Life in the South during the early 20th century was very difficult for African Americans. Many had little choice but to work as sharecroppers and other low-paying jobs. Segregation laws kept southern African Americans in a separate and unequal world. For them, racial violence was a constant threat.

Unsatisfied with the discrimination and lack of opportunities in the South, many African Americans looked to the North with hope of finding more economic opportunities and a better life. These hopes came true during World War I, when the demand for war equipment and supplies skyrocketed and northern factories had more jobs than they could fill. By the thousands, southern blacks streamed into northern cities such as Detroit and Chicago. Black populations in these cities rose sharply. This major relocation of African Americans is known as the Great Migration.

New York City was another destination of African Americans during the Great Migration. By the early 1920’s, about 200,000 African Americans lived in the city. Neighborhoods were not segregated by law like the Jim Crow laws of the South, but by custom. The largest black neighborhood in New York was Harlem. There, black artists, scholars, writers, musicians, actors, political leaders and many others helped bring to life a new African American spirit and culture. This African American arts movement is known as the Harlem Renaissance. For the first time, black artists and intellectuals were recognized for their contributions to world culture. Fueled by racial pride and a confident sense of identity, African American artists stood defiant in the face of prejudice. The Harlem Renaissance may of contributed to the relaxation of racial attitudes among young whites, but perhaps its greatest impact was to reinforce racial pride among blacks.

Blues, ragtime and jazz made its way up the Mississippi River to Kansas City, St. Louis, Chicago and ultimately New York. Musicians like Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Fats Waller, Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, and dozens of others performed in Harlem’s speakeasies, theaters, dance halls and clubs — the fanciest of which, ironically, often let in only white patrons. From Harlem, these performers would in time influence the musical styles and tastes of the entire society, black and white.

*IN YOUR “ROARING TWENTIES” PACKET, ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

1. What was the Great Migration?
2. Why did the Great Migration occur?
3. What was the Harlem Renaissance? Why was it significant?
4. Overall, do you think the Harlem Renaissance was a positive or negative aspect of the 1920’s? Why?