

STUDY GUIDES

The **Chicago Humanities Festival** is committed to creating and fostering interest in the humanities. To this end, the Festival provides study guides to help teachers to bring the humanities into the classroom. Every year, the CHF brings an amazing array of authors, thinkers, and artists to Chicago. We hope you will seize the opportunity to bring the excitement of their works and knowledge to your students.

The unit on **Chicago's Legendary South Side** on the following pages was prepared for the 2001 Chicago Humanities Festival: *Words & Pictures*.

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Chicago's Legendary South Side

In 2001, the Chicago Humanities Festival took a long, multifaceted look at the history and people of the South Side. In three days of programs, well-known writers, musicians, commentators, and historians explored Bronzeville's music, literature, painting, politics, and history.

The following pages offer an overview of the history and cultural significance of Bronzeville. Use the list of Web resources to build lessons around the South Side. Tell your students about the opportunity to participate in the Black Metropolis Project and do real-world sociology for college credit.



Source: Jazz Institute of Chicago.

READING LIST

Baker, Houston A., Jr. *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature*. University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Madhubuti, Haki R. *Groundwork: New and Selected Poems 1966-1996*. Third World Press, 1996.

Miller, Wayne F. *Chicago's South Side, 1946-1948*. University of California Press, 2000.

DISCOGRAPHY

Barrett Sisters. *Best of the Barrett Sisters*. Intersound.

Edwards, David Honeyboy. *Shake 'Em on Down*. APO/APR.

Freeman, Von. *Live at the Dakota*. EMD/Blue Note/Premonition.

Lockwood, Robert, Jr. *I Got to Find Me a Woman*. UNI/Verve.

Perkins, Pinetop. *Live at 85*. Shanachie.

Thompson, Malachi. *47th Street*. Delmark.

Walker, Albertina. *Best of Albertina Walker*. BMG/Verity.

Wilsyn, Bobbi. *It's About Time*.

A Brief History of Bronzeville

Excerpts from “Can Bronzeville Reclaim its Soul?” by Patrick T. Reardon

During the first part of the 20th century, [Bronzeville] was the Black Belt, the place where white Chicago forced virtually all of the city’s African-Americans to live, isolated and quarantined. Then, after court decisions and legislative mandates opened up the other neighborhoods and the suburbs to blacks, those families who could leave, did.

The exodus of wealthy, middle-class and even working-class African-Americans, together with the construction of thousands of high-rise public housing apartments, left Bronzeville a slum of deep and unrelenting poverty, one of the poorest communities in the nation. In 1990, its population was down to just a third what it had been 40 years earlier. The median family income was half what it had been just two decades earlier. And its landscape was dominated by vacant lots, acres and acres of desolate urban prairie. [...]

As the 20th Century drew to a close, however, another trend emerged: Some neighborhoods started to rebound. The once fashionable became fashionable again, particularly those communities near the lake and the Loop. Lincoln Park led the way in the 1970s, followed by Lakeview, Uptown, the Near North Side, Wicker Park, the Near West Side and the South Loop. [...]

Now, it seems, it’s Bronzeville’s turn. [...]

But 81-year-old Timuel Black and other community activists [...] worry that the Bronzeville coming into being will be only a shadow of its namesake, that what was once a vibrant, economically diverse, tightly knit community—a neighborhood of character and zest—will be reinvented as yet another bedroom community for the city’s affluent with no room for the poor.

“Bronzeville will probably wind up, in the next 10 to 15 years, becoming a well-organized, sanitized, middle-class, predominantly black but racially mixed community with... Starbucks scattered through the community,” Black says.

What makes the expected changes even harder for Black and other neighborhood leaders to accept is that, unlike Bucktown or Wrigleyville or other recently gentrified communities, Bronzeville is a place of historic importance to more than a million black Chicagoans and millions of other African-Americans around the nation. In its heyday, Bronzeville rivaled New York’s Harlem as a center of black culture in the U.S. It was the home of jazz and blues, of African-American-owned insurance companies, department stores, banks and funeral

Source: Patrick T. Reardon, “Can Bronzeville Reclaim its Soul?”
Chicago Tribune Magazine, May 21, 2000: 10-16.

homes—and of hundreds of thousands of people. Not for nothing was it also called the Black Metropolis. Virtually all of that was erased from Bronzeville by the urban renewal of the past five decades. In its place, for the most part, are fields of vacant lots. “There’s not enough there to give the aura of what was—physically, culturally, and socially,” Black says. [...]

The wrecking company began work on the Mecca on the last day of 1951 and finished the job three months later, turning the massive, four-story apartment building at 3338 S. State St., once the home of 1,500 people, into a sand-covered empty lot. It was, in many ways, a metaphor for Bronzeville.

Designed by Daniel (“Make no little plans”) Burnham, the Mecca was built in 1891 as an elegant home for the well-to-do. It took up half the block and was, at the time, the largest apartment building in Chicago, boasting 176 luxurious apartments, two covered courtyards ringed by wrought-iron balconies, Italian tile floors, one of the first central heating units in the city and a unique central refrigeration system that sent cooled water to the pantries in each apartment.

And it fit the neighborhood. The South Side east of State Street between the Loop and Hyde Park, called Grand Boulevard-Douglas, had been an enclave of wealth since the Great Fire of 1871. But the Mecca was constructed at the tail end of the area’s age of elegance. Fashions were changing, and the newly developing Gold Coast north of downtown was emerging as the place to be for the city’s movers and shakers.

Within 20 years, a genteel shabbiness had settled on Grand Boulevard-Douglas, now populated by working-class Irish, Italians and blacks. Perhaps 20,000 African Americans were clustered in a narrow three-block-wide strip along State Street, from 22nd Street to 55th Street, an area that would come to be known as the Black Belt. But even more blacks were scattered among the white immigrant families in nearby neighborhoods. That, however, was about to change.

There have been two Great Migrations of African-Americans from the South to Chicago, the first around World War I and the second during and after World War II. Both involved a search for good-paying jobs, and even more for a better life. “There were better opportunities [in Chicago],” wrote poet-artist Margaret Burroughs in 1950, “and best of all, no lynchings.”

But that didn’t mean there was no prejudice or anti-black violence. Between 1910 and 1920, Chicago’s African-American population increased by nearly 150 percent, and the reaction of whites was to isolate blacks in their own self-contained community. One method was to attack any African-American who moved into a white area, and, over a four-year period, the homes of 58 black families were bombed, an average of one every 25 days. This was also the period in which the infamous 1919 race riot occurred, sparked by the murder of a black teenager at a segregated beach at 29th Street. Twenty-three blacks and 15 whites were killed during 14 days of rioting, and more than 500 people were injured.

Another method of segregating African-Americans was the use of restrictive covenants under which homeowners in

a neighborhood would agree not to rent or sell to a black. The result was that, by 1920, nearly all of Chicago's 109,000 African-Americans were concentrated in the Black Belt.

Over time, the Black Belt expanded, but never enough to relieve overcrowding—its population rose to nearly 800,000 by 1960—and the graceful old mansions were converted into rooming houses or subdivided into kitchenette apartments. The Mecca was no exception. Poet Gwendolyn Brooks, who wrote about life in the apartment building, quoted one resident: “There’s 176 apartments and some of ’em’s got seven rooms and they’re all full.”

The overcrowding was oppressive, but it also gave a bustle and vibrancy to neighborhood life. Because white Chicago made no distinction among blacks, virtually all African-Americans, no matter their economic status, were forced to live in the Black Belt. Doctors and lawyers lived next to barbers and ditch-diggers. And there was a constant inflow of money, as many residents worked in white areas but were prohibited from spending their paychecks there.

The Black Belt, also called simply the South Side, grew to be a city within a city, owned and controlled, especially at the beginning, by African-Americans. It had its own commercial center—initially, at 35th and State Streets, later along 47th Street—and its own churches, social clubs, illegal gambling (the policy wheel, a forerunner of today’s state lottery), beauty salons, nightclubs and theaters.

Even its own taxi firm, called Your Cab Co.

That name gives a hint of something else that developed in the neighborhood—a sense of ownership. Although it was a community created by the prejudices of the outside white world, the Black Belt was the one place in Chicago where African-Americans could be themselves. It was their home, and, as such, they gave it a new name of their own: Bronzeville.

The new name was initially popularized by a newspaper stunt, dating from the 1930s, that came to have special meaning for Chicago’s African-Americans: the annual election of an unofficial mayor of Bronzeville.

“The ‘Mayor,’ usually a businessman, is inaugurated with a colorful ceremony and a ball,” wrote sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton in *Black Metropolis*, their 1945 study of Bronzeville. “Throughout his tenure he is expected to serve as a symbol of the community’s aspirations. He visits churches, files protests with the mayor of the city, and acts as official greeter of visitors to Bronzeville.”

The election attracted tens of thousands of voters each year, a measure of the strength of community ties in Chicago’s Bronzeville. So it was no coincidence that, when the tradition sputtered in the 1950s and finally faded away in the early 1960s, those were the same years that Bronzeville itself was disintegrating physically and socially.

A key element in that disintegration was the demolition of thousands of homes and apartments to make way for the wall of high-rise public housing—dozens of buildings—along the west side of State Street. Another was an urban renewal program initiated by two neighborhood institutions, Michael

Reese Hospital and the Illinois Institute of Technology, in the northern portion of the neighborhood.

Great swaths of land were cleared in northeast Bronzeville to make way for new high-rise communities, such as Lake Meadows, which catered to middle-class individuals and families, most of whom were white or Asian. In the northwest corner, tenements were leveled to permit a campus expansion by IIT, which also served mainly whites.

The Mecca, first targeted by IIT in March 1943, was one of those tenements, and its 1,500 people had to find new homes. [...]

Timuel Black, having lived so long and seen so much, is often called upon to lead groups around Bronzeville, recalling its past glories.

“When I take people on a tour,” he says, “I have to point at some vacant land to talk about the Regal or the Savoy or the Metropolitan, the Binga Arcade, the Vendome, the Pythian

Temple. All that’s gone. You have to point to a site: ‘I used to live on the second floor of that vacant lot.’ The imagination can only stretch so far to help the tourists understand the richness. I can’t walk up the steps of a building that isn’t there. When I look at the restoration [of Bronzeville] that’s taking place, so much of the physical history’s been demolished.”

As the neighborhood’s many remaining graystones and redstones are renovated and returned to something like their original elegance, they won’t hark back to the overcrowded days of the Black Belt, but to the earlier time when the community was one of wealth and privilege. [...]

“As the changes take place,” Black says, “the image [of what Bronzeville once looked like] will be very difficult to evoke, simply because so much of it has been wiped out. And so, when you want to learn about the history of Bronzeville, you’re going to have to go to books and read about it.”

A South Side Who's Who

Louis Armstrong (1900-1971), musician. In 1922 “King” Oliver convinced Armstrong to come to Chicago and join his Creole Jazz Band. He played at South Side clubs including the Sunset Cabaret at 35th and Calumet, and made Chicago the jazz capital of the world.

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000), poet. She is the author of more than twenty books of poetry. They include *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945); and *Annie Allen* (1949), for which she received the Pulitzer Prize. In 1968 she became Poet Laureate of the state of Illinois.

Margaret Taylor Burroughs (b. 1917), artist, educator, and writer. In 1961 she and her husband Charles founded what is today the DuSable Museum of African American History.

Frank Marshall Davis (1905-1987), poet. He is the author of *Black Man's Verse* (1935), and *47th Street* (1948), a chronicle of the South Side.

Oscar DePriest (1871-1951), politician. DePriest was the first African American to be elected to the Chicago city council (1915-1917). In 1928 he became the first African American elected to Congress in the 20th century.

St. Clair Drake and **Horace R. Cayton**, writers and sociologists. Their landmark analysis of race and urban life, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, is a founding document of African American studies.

Katherine Dunham, dancer. In the 1930s she studied social anthropology at the University of Chicago. She subsequently traveled to the West Indies, living for a time in Jamaica, where she learned ritual dance. She is the founder of the renowned Katherine Dunham Dance Company.

Capt. Walter Dyett (1901-1969), musician and educator. He became the principal music instructor at DuSable High School in 1935. Feared and respected, his mentorship of jazz musicians is legendary. The roster of his students includes vocalists Nat King Cole and Dinah Washington; pianist Dorothy Donegan; saxophonists Eddie Harris, Von Freeman and Gene Ammons; and many other prominent musicians.

Earl “Fatha” Hines (1903-1983), musician. Pianist Hines moved to Chicago in 1923 where he worked with many prominent musicians, including Louis Armstrong and Erskine Tate. Hines was a major band leader, and from 1928-1943 his band performed at and was broadcast from the Grand Terrace Ballroom.

Archibald J. Motley Jr. (1891-1981), artist. He trained at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago from 1914-1918. Motley is best-known for his portraits and genre scenes of Chicago's Black Belt.

Willard Motley (1912-1965), novelist. His writing career began when, at age 13, he submitted a short story to the *Defender*. He then wrote a weekly column in the children's section under the name "Bud Billiken." He went on to write several novels, including his landmark work, *Knock on Any Door*.

Ray Nance (1913-1976), musician and entertainer. He became a popular Chicago entertainer in the early 1930s. He played in big bands led by Earl "Fatha" Hines and Horace Henderson. Nance performed with Duke Ellington for much of the period from 1940 until 1963.

Joe "King" Oliver (1885-1938), musician. He moved to Chicago in 1919, and played in The Original Creole Orchestra at the Dreamland Ballroom. In 1922 he started King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band at Lincoln Gardens (459 East 31st Street). Oliver was a mentor for Louis Armstrong.

Charles Sebree (1914-1985), artist. Studied at the Art Institute of Chicago. In the late 1930s he was with the WPA Federal Art Project. There was a major exhibit of his work at the South Side Community Arts Center in 1941.

Erskine Tate (1901-1975), musician. The Vendome Theater at 3145 S. State opened in 1919, quickly becoming one of the city's most popular movie houses. Tate's Vendome Orchestra played accompaniment to the silent films, and played during intermissions and between films. The Orchestra provides one of the earliest examples of Big Band music.

Margaret Walker (1915-1998), poet and novelist. Her works bridged the "Chicago Renaissance" of the 1930s and 40s to the black arts movement of the 1960s.

Theodore Ward, playwright. His best known work is the Federal Theater Project drama *Big White Fog* (1938), about Marcus Garvey's ill-fated back-to-Africa movement.

Richard Wright (1908-1960), novelist. He was among the first authors to protest the treatment of blacks by whites. His renowned novel *Native Son* (1940) is set in Chicago.

Bring the *chf* into the Classroom!

Web Resources

There are many valuable, teacher- or student-oriented Web sites exploring the history, people, and culture of the South Side. The Chicago Humanities Festival recommends the following sources for background and lesson plans:

- **Jazz Institute of Chicago *JazzGram*: Bronzeville Conversations**

Go to: <http://www.jazzinstituteofchicago.org>

Then click on *JazzGram*, then on Bronzeville Conversations.

The Bronzeville Conversations extensively document the history of Bronzeville, and particularly its black jazz culture. The conversations cover subjects such as: “Al Benson—the Godfather of Black Radio in Chicago”; “47th Street and South Park Boulevard—Bronzeville’s Downtown”; “The DuSable Hotel and the Drexel Square Area”; and “The Sutherland Lounge.” There are twenty conversations.

- **Chicago Renaissance: 1932-1950: A Flowering of Afro-American Culture**

<http://www.chipublic.org/digital/chiren/index.html>

This site, prepared by the staff of the Chicago Public Library, offers an excellent, concise history of the “Chicago Renaissance.” Separate sections explore literature, journalism, the arts, music, social science, and institutions.

- **Jazz Age Chicago: Urban Leisure from 1893 to 1934**

<http://www.suba.com/~scottn/explore/mainmenu.htm>

This extensive, well organized site provides an overview of everyday life in the Jazz Age. Subject areas include: bright-light districts, department stores, movie theaters, dance halls, hotels, parks and beaches, sports facilities, and transport facilities. For information specific to the South Side, go to:

<http://www.suba.com/~scottn/explore/district/47street/47street.htm>

- **Chicago's Black Metropolis: Understanding History Through a Historic Place**

<http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/53black/53black.htm>

This lesson plan, prepared by the National Register of Historic Places, explores the history of the South Side through its landmark buildings. There are instructions for teachers, student handouts (both texts and images), questions for discussion, and activities.

- **Learning the Blues**

<http://edsitement.neh.gov/lessonplans/blues.html>

This lengthy lesson plan from the National Endowment for the Humanities education site introduces students to the sound and history of the blues.

- **Fly Away: The Great Migration**

<http://www.northbysouth.org/1999/index.htm>

This site explores “the movement of African Americans from the Mississippi Delta to Chicago,” and addresses subjects such as the blues, religion, and food.

Black Metropolis Project

The Black Metropolis Project is a three-year longitudinal study of the original “Black Belt” of Chicago—the area now known as Bronzeville. The project is designed to expand on the classic work by St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. **High school juniors and seniors can participate for college credit**, gathering materials and sociological data relevant to the black Chicago experience.

For more information please contact Prof. Theordoric Manley, Jr., Ph.D. of DePaul University: (773) 325-4718 or tmanley@depaul.edu.

A Bibliography of the South Side

In conjunction with the Legendary South Side programs, the CHF commissioned experts to prepare a bibliography of African-American Chicago writers.

Research and compilation was done by Dr. B. J. Bolden, Marilyn Gilbert-Mitchell, M.A., and Audrey Tolliver of the Gwendolyn Brooks Center for Black Literature and Creative Writing at Chicago State University. Several name-only listings were provided by Dr. James Hall of the University of Illinois at Chicago.

This extensive bibliography, comprising over 250 entries, can be accessed online. Go to <http://www.chfestival.org/education.cfm?Action=EdLessons>, then, under "Bibliography of African-American Chicago Writers," click on "Download Lesson Plan."

Here's a short sampling of major works. The editions cited here are those that are most current and easily accessible, not the original editions.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Blacks*. Third World Press, 1991.

Drake, St. Clair and Horace R. Cayton. *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun: A Drama in Three Acts*. Vintage Books, 1994.

Motley, Willard. *Knock on Any Door*. Northern Illinois University Press, 1989.

Walker, Margaret. *For My People*. Ayer Company Publishers, 1968.

Ward, Theodore. *Big White Fog*. In *Black Theater, U.S.A.* Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1974.

Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. Harperperennial Library, 1989.