

UNIT III: THE DEPRESSION (1919-1940)

Topics: Cultural Minorities and Women

INTRODUCTION TO TEACHERS

During the early years of the twentieth century, there was a steady migration of southern African Americans to northern cities promising new social and economic opportunity. While many African Americans migrated to large metropolitan areas, a smaller segment moved to rural communities like Waterloo. Between the years 1910 and 1920 the small band of African Americans in Waterloo expanded from a handful of isolated residents to an active community boasting more than 800 members.

Both adverse social and economic conditions in the South contributed to the great northern migration of African Americans in the early years of the twentieth century. Crop failures and increased racial tension forced many southern African Americans to look for employment elsewhere.

In Waterloo, the Illinois Central Railroad employed many African American workers recruited from southern states. Both a strike in 1911 by the shopmen and a management decision to expand operations contributed to the availability of jobs for African American workers.

In addition to working for the railroad, African Americans found employment in industry and various other service occupations but with less mobility than white workers.

During the 1920's, the Waterloo African American population continued to develop and a community identity emerged. Institutions aimed at strengthening the African American community such as a branch of the NAACP provided a vehicle by which spokespersons for the community could address problems common to the African American community.

The Great Depression in Waterloo: The African American Experience includes interview summaries of three African American residents of Waterloo. Their early memories of Waterloo provide valuable insight into the African American Experience during the twenties and thirties when the Depression settled upon Iowa.