

HIDDEN STORIES: Montana's Black Past

Teaching Guide



MONTANA
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

This 57-minute movie traces Montana's African American history from the Civil War to the present day. It foregrounds Montana's pioneering Black residents and frames their experiences within the greater context of Montana history across space and time.

Link to the movie:

<https://tinyurl.com/MontanasBlackPast>

For teaching purposes, *Hidden Stories* can be divided into three sections. For each section, we have provided a synopsis (for teacher prep), a focus question to share with your students before watching the video, post-viewing discussion questions, and useful vocabulary terms. We have also suggested a strategy for helping students retain the information they learned through watching the film.

Synopsis: Pre-Civil War Era to the End of Reconstruction (Start to 16:20)

This segment explores how many Black Americans found Montana Territory to be an attractive place for a fresh start following Emancipation and the end of the Civil War. Lack of resources and few transportation options put the American West out of reach for most Black Americans. Service in the military provided Black men the opportunity for upward mobility and to leave the South. Other pathways Black Americans found for getting to Montana included jobs as wagon masters, cowboys, domestic servants, and steamboat crewmen. Montana Territory offered opportunity to its African American residents, but legal discrimination, bigotry, and episodic conflict did occur.

Pre-viewing Focus Question

James Crump, a free Black man who served in the Union Army during the Civil War, came to Virginia City shortly after he mustered out in 1865. Why do you think he came here?

Post-viewing Discussion Questions

- How did Montana's first Black residents get here? Why did they come?
- Why did Black migration to the American West increase after the Civil War?
- What did the Territorial Suffrage Act do and why was it important?
- What barriers prevented more Black Americans from coming to Montana?
- Did Black women have the right to vote or the opportunity to serve in the military?

Vocabulary Terms

- Suffrage
- Territory
- Sovereignty

Synopsis: Jim Crow to the Depression (16:20 to 39:32)

This segment considers the heyday of Black Montana. The deployment of the Buffalo Soldiers to Montana and completion of the Great Northern and Northern Pacific rail lines brought Black Americans to Montana in greater numbers. They built community through social and entrepreneurial organizations, including churches, women's literacy and church clubs, and Black-owned newspapers. Economic opportunities in Montana available to its Black citizens mirrored those available to others and included work in the service and hospitality industry, business development, and real estate ownership. However, Black Montanans often experienced discrimination in the workplace and exclusion from jobs in Montana's mining, smelting, and timber industries. National trends, like the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, influenced Montana's political and cultural landscape. Montana passed an anti-miscegenation law in 1909, and Black Montanans experienced increased violence and discrimination.



Pre-viewing Focus Question

James Crump married Clarissa Powell and settled in Helena in 1869. The family built a home near the Montana State Capitol in 1889. In addition to owning a home, in what other ways do you think the Crump family was part of the Helena community?

Post-viewing Discussion Questions

- What are Jim Crow laws? How did they influence Black settlement in Montana?
- Who were the Buffalo Soldiers? What types of jobs did they do?
- In what ways did Montana's Black citizens build community? How did they integrate into the larger community?
- In what ways did Black women assert their agency? What does "lifting as we climb" mean to you?

Vocabulary Terms

- Jim Crow laws
- Segregation
- Miscegenation
- Agency

Synopsis: Depression to the Present (39:32 to end)

The video concludes by discussing the effect of Montana's economic depression on its Black citizens. Dwindling opportunities and increased discriminatory practices, including policies set by labor unions and companies like the Anaconda Company, discouraged Black Americans from moving to Montana during the Great Migration. Montana saw a significant decline in its Black population as individuals and families left for employment and educational opportunities elsewhere. Some Black Montanans, like Alma Smith Jacobs and Octavia Bridgewater, pursued education outside Montana but returned to make a difference in their communities. Black women's clubs and the Black Student Union created change and made Montana's Black population more visible.

Pre-viewing Focus Question

The Crump family maintained an enduring presence in Helena for over 150 years but saw many of their Black friends and neighbors move away. Why do you think they left?

Post-Viewing Discussion Questions

- Why did many Black Montanans leave during Montana's economic downturn in the 1920s through the Depression era?
- How did Black women's clubs contribute to the civil rights movement at the state level?
- What is the Black Student Union and how did it change higher education in Montana?
- What role did the military and athletics play in bringing new Black residents to Montana?

Vocabulary Terms

- Labor union
- Great Migration

After the Movie

Implement Project Zero's +1 Thinking Routine. This is a strategy for identifying ideas worth remembering. After students have completed watching the movie, ask them to

- Spend 2–3 minutes individually writing lists of key ideas that they remember from the presentation (no notes allowed).
- Pass their papers to the right. Give students 1–2 minutes to review the list in front of them and add one new thing. Students may add new information, expand on an existing point, or make a connection between two points. Repeat this process at least twice.
- Return the papers to the original owners and have students read through and review all of the additions made to their sheets. Provide them the opportunity to add any additional ideas they picked up from reading others' sheets that they think are worthwhile.

[Read more about this Project Zero Thinking Routine.](#)

