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In 2021 the Grand Rapids Public Museum, funded through a grant from Steelcase Inc. partnered with East Kentwood Highschool Teacher, Matt Vriesman, to develop curriculum inspired by a GRPM exhibition, Windows GR. The curriculum utilizes the GRPM Digital Collections to teach about local Black leaders and efforts to battle racial segregation in Grand Rapids, Michigan in the early 1900s. The lessons are also published on Matt Vriesman's website, [Antiracist APUSH](#).

The Grand Rapids Public Museum supports educational efforts in West Michigan and beyond through the use of its Collections and community stories. Find out more or create your own by visiting [GRPMCollection.org](#) and clicking on Teacher Galleries.



## Great Migration Case Study: Oliver Green, Emmett Bolden, and the Fight Against Jim Crow in Grand Rapids, MI

### Description

*"This small community's collective agency reflected the determination of African Americans nationwide to be free from the corrosive effects of racial segregation." - Historian Dr. Randal Jelks*

Jim Crow was not a problem relegated to the Southern States. High school students are familiar with the story of Rosa Parks and the NAACP's fight to end segregation in the South but are often unaware of the fact that decades before Rosa Parks' activism, the NAACP had employed these same tactics to fight anti-Black racism in the North. It is impossible to understand modern America without proper study of the challenges and discrimination faced by participants of the Great Migration. Students should also learn the patterns of resilience and resistance that emerged in Black communities throughout the North following the transition.

In this lesson, students will take a 'virtual tour' of Grand Rapids by following a map linked to artifacts and newspaper stories from the GRPM Collections. This lesson shifts back and forth between teacher-led, whole-class instruction and student independent work. Students will use Grand Rapids as a case study of the experiences of the first migrants out of the South by contextualizing the period right after the Civil War as the Freedman's Bureau brought Black laborers to work in the city for the first time. Students will then follow the migration patterns of participants of the Great Migration and learn the strategies employed by the local Black community in conjunction with the NAACP to battle segregation and press the Michigan Supreme Court into action in the late 1920s. This strategy was remarkably similar to tactics used throughout the South decades later.

### Objectives:

- Students will contextualize the experience of Black residents in a northern city after the Civil War
- Students will analyze the extent that Black citizens' lives improved after migrating to Grand Rapids
- Students will compare different responses to Jim Crow from the Black community of Grand Rapids

### AP U.S. History Unit 7: Period 7: 1890-1945 7.6: World War 1 Home Front

#### AP Skills:

- 1.A Identify a historical concept, development, or process.
- 1.B Explain a historical concept, development, or process.
- 4.B Explain how a specific historical development or process is situated within a broader historical context.
- 6.A Make a historically defensible claim.
- 6.B Support an argument using specific and relevant evidence.

**Place in the Curriculum:** This is the final lesson in a Great Migration mini unit. The previous lesson, students work on the [Jim Crow Moves North Group DBQ](#). That lesson is focused on discrimination faced by participants of the Great Migration across the North. This lesson provides context for the Black experience in a mid-sized northern city and compares different responses to Jim Crow from the Black community. Background on the strategies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois is helpful. Students discuss these men in the previous unit [in this lesson](#).

#### Materials:

- Slide Deck - <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1Ulyn-SzzN0WuWgdBUNgFXospuul2xleIWGjTyyF-D04/copy>
- Student Handout - <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1AIN8jMxxCiaiBEeTWcyNIIRhoVe5QT8R45SJgvQ13B0/copy>

#### Notes:

This lesson was designed to be completed in 1-2 class periods. It starts and ends with whole-class learning and provides opportunities for independent student work throughout the middle sections. However, the whole experience can be implemented in a student self-directed format, if preferred. Students can click through the slidedeck and use it to follow the handout. We encourage you to copy, revise, condense, add to any of these materials to fit your objectives and student needs.

## Lesson Plan

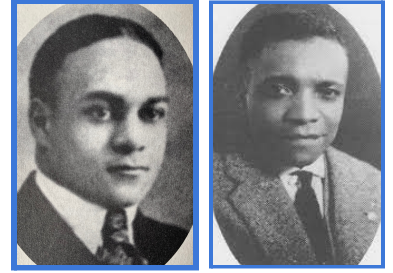
1. **Teacher-led Introduction**
  - a. The teacher should guide students through the introduction in the [slide deck](#). Students should follow along on the [handout](#) and complete questions #1-3 during this section.
    - i. Review the lesson's "central questions" (slide 2).
    - ii. Review the context and show photographs of Comstock Row and James Craig (slides 3-9).
2. **Set the Scene/Build Context (Teacher-led)**
  - a. Introduce the national context by covering the Great Migration and drawing out student prior knowledge (slide #10 and question #4 of the handout). Give the students about 60 seconds to brainstorm and then complete a think-pair-share
  - b. After reviewing life for Black residents in the South following the Civil War (slide 11), read the Michigan Civil Rights Act of 1885 (slide 12). Ask students why this might be significant for potential migrants (question #5 of handout).
  - c. Read the Richard Wright poem, "Warmth of Other Suns" (slide 13). Ask for students to list the emotions described by the author. Give them another short brainstorm time and a chance to respond to question #6 of the handout and share out responses. (*Sample answers: Fear, hope, etc*)
3. **Student Investigation - Virtual Tour of race relations in Grand Rapids in the early 1900s**
  - a. Students will explore primary sources and local anecdotes to understand more about how the city of Grand Rapids treated new black residents who had moved to the City following the Civil War.
  - b. Use slides 14-15 to introduce the purpose of the independent work section. Make the slides presentation available to the students. They should start on slide 16 with the map of Grand Rapids. As they take a "mini tour" of the city, they will click through points on the map to learn about different aspects of the Black experience in Grand Rapids. The map will lead them up through slide 28.
  - c. I recommend prompting students to click on every link and then choose what they consider to be the 3 strongest examples for question #7 of their handout. You can adapt this to your time constraints as you see fit.
4. **Whole Group Discussion - Share Findings of Virtual Tour**
  - a. Allow time for students to share and then have them fill out the chart for question #8 in their handout.
  - b. At this point, I make sure to reference the stop on the tour at Park Congregational Church and visits to the city by Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois (slide 28). This will help to set up the next part of the lesson.
5. **The Black Community's Response to Discrimination (Teacher-led)**
  - a. This section explores several different responses to the discrimination that the Black community experienced in the city, starting with the Grand Rapids Study Club, then taking an in-depth look at the work of the Grand Rapids chapter of the NAACP.
    - i. Read through slides 30-33 on the Grand Rapids Study Club, pausing where appropriate to allow students to record their thoughts and responses to questions #9-11 on the handout.
    - ii. Introduce the work of the Grand Rapids chapter of the NAACP (slide 34) and present the slides that feature Rosa Parks and Thurgood Marshall (slides 35-36).
    - iii. Use slide 37 to explain that the same famous strategies the NAACP employed in the South in the 1950s were actually employed decades earlier in Grand Rapids. Give them a brief introduction to Emmett Bolden and Oliver M. Green, emphasizing the parallels with well-known figures Rosa Parks and Thurgood Marshall. Pause where appropriate for students to record responses to questions #12-13 on the handout.
6. **Student Investigation - Explore the strategies Oliver Green and the NAACP used to fight segregation in Grand Rapids.**
  - a. Students will delve into the details of NAACP direct action in Grand Rapids; this will be very similar to the NAACP/Rosa Parks strategy that they are already familiar with! Give a brief introduction to Ms. Hallie Q. Brown (slides #38) before releasing them to the independent investigation.
    - i. In this time, they should read from slides #38-48 and complete questions #14-17. Students should start working on the slides with Hallie Q. Brown and then work through the 4-part strategy employed by Oliver M. Green to attack Jim Crow-like segregation in Grand Rapids.
  - b. We recommend coming together as a whole group to emphasize slides #49-50 and question #18 on the student handout. At the culmination of this section, it's an important point to stop and predict how the local community, through the *Grand Rapids Press*, responded to the historic decision of the Bolden Case.
7. **Whole Group Reflections and Final Discussion**
  - a. The processing discussion is crucial to this lesson. No matter how far the students are with questions #14-18, with at least 10 minutes left in the class period, transition to the conclusion discussion.

- i. As an alternative, you may have students choose a few of the questions to write responses to individually. However, the rich discussions and insights that come out of whole-class discussion would be preferable if time allows.
- b. Emphasize the broader takeaways from this local case study:
  - i. Communicate the key point from local historian Dr. Randal Jelks, “This small community’s collective agency reflected the determination of African Americans nationwide to be free from the corrosive effects of racial segregation.”
  - ii. Although the focus of this lesson was on Grand Rapids, one mid-sized midwestern city, it is representative of a microcosm of the Black responses to Jim Crow outside of the South in the period between the world wars.
  - iii. The examples of the way Black leaders and community members organized and battled against injustice are often left out of history books; this lesson highlights these important stories and individuals.

# Oliver Green, Emmett Bolden, and the Fight Against Jim Crow in Grand Rapids

## Essential Questions

- When did the Black population in Grand Rapids increase?
- Why did Black migrants choose to settle in Grand Rapids?
- Were the promises of equal citizenship realized?
- How did the Black community respond to discrimination?



## Section 1: Contextualization

1. Which major event in American history led to the start of a sizable Black population in Grand Rapids?
2. What was "Comstock Row"? How did it come to be the largest settlement of Black Americans in Grand Rapids in the late 19th century?
3. What job opportunities were available to the early Black migrants to Grand Rapids?

## Section 2: The Great Migration

4. *Brainstorm*: What do you already know about this topic? What were some of the reasons why millions of Black Americans were leaving the South in the early 20th century?
5. Why would the Michigan Civil Rights Act of 1885 have been significant for participants in the Great Migration?
6. Based on the words of Richard Wright's poem, what words would you use to describe the feelings of "Great Migrants" who moved north?

## Section 3: A Tour of Grand Rapids in the Early 20th Century

7. **Directions**: Explore each of the significant locations around the map (shown as red dots) to learn how Black citizens were treated in Grand Rapids at the turn of the last century. *Consider*: Was the move to Grand Rapids worth it from the refugees of Southern anti-Black brutality?

Choose 3 specific locations on the map and briefly describe what you learned at each location:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

8. Your analysis:

Evidence that life in Grand Rapids was better than in the South:	Evidence that Grand Rapids was not living up to the promises of the Michigan Civil Rights Act

**Section 4: ACTION! The Grand Rapids Black Community's Response to Discrimination**

**Uplift: The Grand Rapids Study Club**

9. What was the purpose of the Grand Rapids Study Club?

10. In your own words, what do you think the club motto, "Rowing, Not Drifting" meant?

11. Review the quotes from and about the GR Study Club. Why do you think the Club was significant for members of Grand Rapids' Black community in the 1920's?

**Direct Action: The Grand Rapids Chapter of the NAACP**

12. How did the NAACP's response to Jim Crow differ from that of the Grand Rapids Study Club?

13. Who were Emmett Bolden and Oliver Green? What similarities do they have with Rosa Parks and Thurgood Marshall?

14. Who was Hallie Q. Brown and what was the purpose of her message at Messiah Baptist Church in December of 1925?

15. Briefly summarize the four part strategy of lawyer Oliver M. Green for attacking Jim Crow laws in Grand Rapids. *Please note, Historian Dr. Randal Jelks explains that this was the exact direct action strategy that Black communities were taking across the United States at the time.*

Strategy, Part 1:
Part 2:
Part 3:
Part 4:

16. How did W.E.B. Du Bois help the Bolden case in Grand Rapids?

17. What did the Michigan Supreme Court say about Jim Crow laws in Michigan in their decision on June 6, 1927?

18. **STOP AND PREDICT**: What do you think the Grand Rapids Press's coverage was like the days after this major landmark decision? Critical? Supportive?

19. What do you think Historian Dr. Randal Maurice Jelks means by the "community's **collective agency**"? What does this tell us about Black American history in general?

## Discussion Questions

- Were Black citizens in Grand Rapids able to "bloom" as the poet Richard Wright hoped? Were the dreams of Black migrants of Grand Rapids realized?
- Was the 1885 Michigan Civil Rights Act implemented?
- Why do you think Oliver Green decided to settle out of court in the case of Glenn and Grant? Why not take their case to the Michigan Supreme Court? Why do extra work with Bolden?
- Why didn't the Grand Rapids Press contain an article about this historic *Bolden* decision in 1927?
- It's hard to find a high school student in Grand Rapids who doesn't know who Rosa Parks was, but it's also hard to find a student who knows who Emmett Bolden was. Why do you think that is?
- Why do you think Grand Rapids has a city park named "Rosa Parks Circle," but not an "Emmett Bolden Park" or statue?