The Great Migration

When Evacuation Becomes Migration: Mapping Population Change After the 1927 Flood

Time: 60-75 minutes (without optional extended reading)

Grades 6- 12 Social Studies / Geography, Mississippi River Flood of 1927 Centennial

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Overview

The 1927 Mississippi River flood did not simply move people temporarily. It interacted with labor systems, transportation networks, racial inequality, and migration patterns that were already underway. In this lesson, students read historically grounded vignettes about families facing the choice to return or leave, sort the forces behind those choices into push, pull, and pathway factors, and then build a layered map that makes demographic change visible. Students finish by comparing 1927 with a modern disaster (Hurricane Katrina or Hurricane Harvey) and asking what destination cities gained when people arrived.

Quick Links:

Lesson Outline

Migration Vignettes

Standards

Essential Question:

How can a disaster change the human geography of a region long after the water recedes?

Learning Objectives

SWBAT:

- Distinguish among evacuation, displacement, and migration.
- Use historical evidence to explain how the 1927 Mississippi River flood interacted with existing economic, racial, labor, and social conditions to influence migration.
- Identify push factors, pull factors, and pathways that shape migration decisions.

- Interpret a map to explain how transportation routes and social networks influence population movement.
- Compare migration and displacement after the 1927 flood with movement associated with a more recent disaster.

Sequence

The first duration counts an A/B day schedule with 80- 90 minute class periods.

The second duration (in parentheses) counts daily schedules with 45- 60 minute class periods.

Part	Focus	Duration
Part A: Push, Pull, and Pathways	Warmup, vocabulary, vignette jigsaw, push/pull/pathway sort, simple route map	½ block (1 day)
Part B: Mapping Population Change	Four-layer migration map, household decision, modern disaster comparison, closing discussion	1 block (1- 2 days)
Total		1½ blocks (2- 3 days)

Teacher Notes

- Vignettes are fictionalized composites based on documented historical conditions. Present them as illustrations of real circumstances, not biographies of specific people.
- Key framing: The 1927 flood did not create the Great Migration, but it changed the calculations people made about whether to stay or leave. Return to this sentence throughout.
- Sensitive content: The lesson addresses racial violence, debt peonage, and forced labor in Red Cross camps. Set discussion norms before starting.
- Grades 6- 8: Use the simpler route map in Part A, give students pre-labeled maps and short evidence cards in Part B, and provide sentence starters for written responses.
- Grades 9- 12: Have students locate evidence in longer excerpts from Barry and Mizelle, add segmented labor market theory to the Vignette 2 discussion, and complete the full modern-disaster comparison.

- Connections: Builds on earlier lessons on segmented labor markets, forced labor, Red Cross policies, and federal flood control, and leads into the Blues, Culture, and Memory lesson. Conceptual progression: Flood → displacement → labor control → migration → demographic change → cultural change.

If time is limited, prioritize the migration map, household decision-making, and closing discussion. The destination-city cultural contribution activity can be used as an extension or connection to the Blues, Culture, and Memory lesson.

Vocabulary for Focus

- Evacuation - leaving because of immediate danger.
- Displacement - being unable to remain or return temporarily.
- Migration - relocating with a longer-term or permanent change in residence.
- Push factors - conditions that encourage people to leave a place.
- Pull factors - conditions that attract people to another place.
- Pathways - transportation routes and social networks that make migration possible.
- Demographic change - a change in the size, composition, or distribution of a population.

Lesson A/B When Evacuation Becomes Migration

Time: Part A 45- 60 minutes · Part B 60- 75 minutes

Central question: How can a disaster change the human geography of a region long after the water recedes?

Part A: Push, Pull, and Pathways

Objectives

SWBAT:

- Distinguish between evacuation, displacement, and migration.
- Identify push, pull, and pathway factors in historically grounded vignettes.
- Explain how the 1927 flood changed the decisions families made about staying or leaving.

Teacher Notes

Run the vignettes as a jigsaw: five groups, one vignette each. Every group reports back so the whole class hears all five perspectives.

Vignettes 1 and 2 pair well: they show the same flood from a tenant family's and a landowner's point of view. Make sure both are shared.

Grades 6- 8: read the vignettes aloud in groups and assign one question per student.
Grades 9- 12: add the segmented labor market question to Vignette 2.

Materials

- Student Handout: Five Migration Vignettes, one copy per group
- Board or chart paper divided into three columns: PUSH / PULL / PATHWAY
- Sticky notes
- Provided PowerPoint map (for the route-mapping step)
- Student notebooks or exit ticket slips

Lesson Outline

Warmup (5- 8 minutes):

1. Write on the board or display: What would make you decide not to return home after a flood?
    a. Students list three factors on their own, then compare with a partner.
    b. Expect answers like jobs, housing, risk of another flood, family elsewhere, discrimination, insurance, damaged roads and schools, transportation, or a better opportunity somewhere else.
2. Introduce the three vocabulary terms: evacuation, displacement, migration.
3. Ask: When does evacuation become migration?
4. Tell students this question will run through the whole lesson.

Intro/Mini Lesson/Activity: Vignette jigsaw (15- 20 minutes)

5. Each group reads one vignette and answers its "Ask Students" questions. Groups list every push, pull, and pathway factor they find on sticky notes.
    a. Vignette 1: The Train North (tenant family weighing Chicago)
    b. Vignette 2: "We Need Our Labor Back" (landowner vs. tenant view of recovery)
    c. Vignette 3: Following the Railroad (networks and chain migration)
    d. Vignette 4: A New Community in Houston (culture moves with people)
    e. Vignette 5: Return or Stay? (when displacement becomes migration)

Share out (10 minutes). Each group summarizes its family's situation in two or three sentences and posts its sticky notes on the board.

Push / Pull / Pathway sort (10 minutes)

6. Write the framing sentence on the board: The 1927 flood did not create the Great Migration, but it changed the calculations people made about whether to stay or leave.
7. As a class, sort the sticky notes into the three columns.
    a. If students only produce push and pull, introduce the third column, PATHWAY, and ask what people needed besides a reason to leave and a place to go.

PUSH	PULL	PATHWAY
Flood damage Debt Sharecropping Racial discrimination Restricted mobility Loss of housing Future flood risk	Industrial jobs Cash wages Family networks Existing Black communities Greater economic mobility Urban opportunities	Railroads Relatives Churches Friends Earlier migrants Information about jobs and housing

Route map (5- 10 minutes).

8. Using the provided PowerPoint map, students draw Delta → Memphis → St. Louis → Chicago, then add other possible routes and destination cities
    a. For example, Houston, Detroit
    b. The goal: migration is a network, not a single line from Point A to Point B. (Grades 6- 8 may stop here; Part B builds the full layered map.)

Exit Ticket:

9. Was the 1927 flood primarily a cause of migration, a catalyst for migration, or an opportunity for people to act on pressures that already existed?
10. Answer in two or three sentences and use one example from a vignette.

Optional sentence starter (6- 8): I think the flood was a ___ because in the vignette about ___, ___.

Part B: Mapping Population Change After the 1927 Flood

Objectives

SWBAT:

- Build a layered map showing the flood, population movement, transportation routes, and push/pull factors.
- Use evidence from Barry and Mizelle to justify a household's migration decision.
- Compare migration after 1927 with displacement after Hurricane Katrina or Hurricane Harvey.
- Explain how migration changed destination communities as well as the places people left.

Teacher Notes

Print and cut the household strips from the Great Migration Household Descriptions file, one strip per group.

The household decision is not about guessing what a real individual did. It shows how different people had very different ranges of choice.

Grades 6- 8: give groups pre-labeled maps and three or four short evidence cards.

Grades 9- 12: have students pull their own evidence from longer excerpts and complete all four layers independently.

Prepare a short data sheet or reading on Katrina or Harvey displacement before class (destination cities, return rates)

Materials

- One large map per group of the Mississippi River region and the United States, showing:
    - the Mississippi River
    - the approximate 1927 flooded region
    - the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas
    - Louisiana
    - Memphis
    - New Orleans
    - Houston

    - St. Louis
    - Chicago
    - Detroit
    - other northern industrial cities
    - major railroad corridors
- Colored markers or sticky notes, plus a second color for the modern-disaster layer
- Evidence cards with short excerpts from John M. Barry, Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America (1997), and Richard M. Mizelle Jr., Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination (2014)
- Household strips (Great Migration Household Descriptions file)
- Teacher-prepared Katrina or Harvey displacement data
- Push/Pull/Pathway chart from Part A

Lesson Outline:

Warmup (5 minutes):

1. Review the Part A chart.
2. Each student names one push, one pull, and one pathway factor from memory.
3. Ask again: When does evacuation become migration?

Intro/Mini Lesson/Activity: Build the migration map (20 minutes)

4. Groups add four layers to their map:
    a. Layer 1, Flood: shade or outline the area most heavily affected by the 1927 flood.
    b. Layer 2, People: using evidence cards from Barry and Mizelle, mark places where people were displaced and draw arrows toward possible destinations.
    c. Layer 3, Transportation: add major rail and transportation corridors. Ask: Do the arrows follow the railroads? People do not migrate randomly; they move along networks that already exist.
    d. Layer 4, Opportunity and constraint: at destinations, add “+” symbols (employment, relatives/community networks, greater mobility, urban opportunities). At origins, add “- ” symbols (flood destruction, plantation labor system, debt/sharecropping, racial violence/discrimination, repeated environmental risk). The map now shows a push-pull system, not just arrows.

Migration decision (15 minutes).

5. Each group receives one household strip and decides: Return, Relocate nearby, or Migrate farther away.
6. Groups must cite three pieces of evidence from Barry, Mizelle, or their map.

Household	Situation
A: Mississippi Delta sharecroppers	Your home and crops have been flooded. Your family has relatives in Chicago. The landowner wants laborers to return for the next crop.
B: Delta landowning family	Your land has been damaged, but federal flood-control investment is expected to increase protection in the future.
C: Louisiana family with relatives in Houston	Your community has experienced flooding and job losses. Family members elsewhere say work and housing may be available.
D: Agricultural laborer with no distant family	Your home is damaged, but almost everyone you know lives locally.

Human migration is a system (10 minutes)

7. Groups place their decision on a shared class map.
8. Ask: What patterns do you see?
9. Draw the connecting chains on the board:
    a. Flood → property loss → job disruption → migration
    b. Flood → existing racial and labor inequality → desire to leave → transportation network → destination community
    c. Earlier migrants → family and community networks → easier migration for later migrants
10. **Emphasize: the 1927 flood did not cause the Great Migration by itself. It acted as a catalyst within a migration already driven by economic, racial, labor, and social forces.**

Modern disaster layer (10- 15 minutes)

11. With a second color, groups add displacement after Hurricane Katrina (2005) or Hurricane Harvey (2017).

    a. For Katrina, students might map movement from New Orleans to Houston, Baton Rouge, Atlanta, Dallas, and other cities.
12. Discuss:
    a. What factors influenced whether people returned after each disaster?
    b. How did family networks, jobs, housing, race, income, and government policy shape people's choices?
    c. Which moves look temporary, and which contributed to lasting demographic change?
    d. Does disaster create migration, or does it speed up decisions people were already considering?

What did the destination gain? (5 minutes)

13. Each group picks one destination city and completes:
    a. "People brought…" (labor, music, foodways, religious traditions, political organization, family networks, businesses, language, cultural traditions).
    b. This connects to the Blues, Culture, and Memory lesson: the flood produced cultural change elsewhere, not only loss.
14. Final map product checklist
    a. Each map should show Flood → Movement → Decision → Demographic Change and include:
        i. At least three migration arrows
        ii. At least three push factors
        iii. At least three pull factors
        iv. At least two pieces of evidence from Barry or Mizelle
        v. One comparison with Katrina or Harvey

Exit Ticket:

15. Close with a whole-class discussion of the two questions below, then have each student answer one in writing:
    a. Was the 1927 flood primarily a cause of migration, or a catalyst that exposed reasons people already had to leave?
    b. Who had the ability to choose whether to return, and who had that choice constrained by labor, wealth, race, family networks, or public policy?

Five Migration Vignettes

Teacher Notes:

These vignettes are fictionalized composites based on documented historical conditions. They are designed to help students consider how flood damage, race, labor, transportation, family networks, and economic opportunity shaped migration decisions after 1927. They should not be presented as biographies of specific individuals.

Vignette 1: The Train North

The water has finally begun to recede, but the farm does not look like the place the family left. Mud covers the fields. The house needs repairs. The year's crop is largely gone.

A Black tenant farmer and his wife have lived in the Mississippi Delta for most of their lives. They do not own the land they work on and before the flood, they already owed money to the plantation store. Returning means rebuilding a home on someone else's property, borrowing again for seed and supplies, and hoping the next crop will allow them to reduce their debt.

A cousin in Chicago has been writing for several years. He says factory work is difficult; the winters are terrible, and housing is expensive. But he also says wages are paid in cash. The railroad station is not far away. Before the flood, leaving seemed risky. Now returning seems risky too.

Ask Students:

- Did the flood cause this family to migrate, or did it make an existing possibility of migration seem more reasonable?
- What factors are pushing them away from the Delta?
- What factors are pulling them toward Chicago?

Vignette 2: “We Need Our Labor Back”

The plantation owner survived the flood. His house sits somewhat on higher ground, and he has access to credit. The fields are damaged, but he expects cotton production to resume. His biggest concern is labor.

Hundreds of Black families have spent weeks in refugee camps. Some are talking about leaving the Delta. Railroad connections make Memphis, St. Louis, Chicago, and other cities reachable in ways they had not been a generation earlier. The owner argues that recovery will be impossible if workers leave. A tenant family living on his plantation sees the situation differently. For the landowner, returning workers means rebuilding the agricultural economy. For the workers, leaving may mean escaping a labor system that has limited their economic mobility for years. Both sides call what happens next "recovery." But they mean very different things.

Ask Students:

- Who gets to define what "recovery" means after a disaster?
- Why might keeping people in the region be considered economic recovery by one group and restricted mobility by another?
- How does this vignette connect to segmented labor market theory?

Vignette 3: Following the Railroad

A young man from the Delta has never been to St. Louis. But he knows someone who has. His older brother went north several years earlier and writes home about work, crowded neighborhoods, music clubs, churches, and other people from Mississippi living nearby. After the flood, the young man reaches Memphis. From there, railroad lines connect him to cities farther north. He does not simply choose a point on a map. He follows a network. Family members tell him where he might sleep. Friends know where employers hire Black workers. Church members know families who can help someone newly arrived. People who migrated earlier make migration easier for people who come later. One person's migration becomes another person's pathway.

Ask Students:

- Why do migration patterns often follow transportation routes and existing social networks?
- How might the railroad system influence which cities grew during the Great Migration?
- Once a migration pathway becomes established, can it continue even after the original disaster has ended?

Vignette 4: A New Community in Houston

A Louisiana family has lost much of what it owned. Relatives tell them that Houston is growing rapidly and that work may be available there. Other Louisiana families have already moved west. When they arrive, they bring more than labor. They bring food traditions, music, religious practices, language and accents, family connections, ways of celebrating, and stories about Louisiana. They settle near other migrants who share some of those traditions. Over time, the neighborhood develops an identity connected both to Houston and to the Louisiana communities its residents left behind. The flood has changed one community. Migration begins changing another.

Ask Students:

- When people migrate, what moves besides people?
- How might migration transform the culture of the destination city?
- Is demographic change only about population numbers?

This vignette works particularly well with Mizelle's discussion of Louisiana migration and the development of Houston's Frenchtown.

Vignette 5: Return or Stay?

Several months after the flood, a family faces a decision. They are temporarily living with relatives outside the flooded region. Their children have started attending another school. One parent has found work. Their old home can probably be repaired. Friends and relatives are returning, but the family remembers the water. They also remember waiting for assistance. They remember wondering whether the levee would protect them the next time. Returning means recovering something familiar. Staying means beginning something uncertain. Neither choice is easy.

Ask Students:

- At what point does temporary displacement become migration?
- What might make a family decide that returning home is no longer the best option?
- Which factors matter most: employment, housing, family, culture, government assistance, environmental risk, or something else

Standards Addressed

Standards are grouped by state and grade band. Descriptions are short summaries; see each state's official document for full wording. Because Louisiana grades 6-7 and Mississippi grades 7-8 cover earlier eras, those grades align mainly through the skills standards and CCSS literacy standards.

Louisiana: Louisiana Student Standards for Social Studies (2022)

Grade / Course	Code	Focus (summary)
Grade 8	8.12.g	Causes of the 1927 Great Mississippi River Flood and how the government response affected Louisianans
Grade 8	8.12.j	Causes and effects of early 20th-century migration and population shifts, including the Great Migration
Grade 8	8.12.e	Social and cultural changes of the 1920s and 1930s
Grade 8	8.17.c	Effects of natural disasters on Louisiana and the U.S., including Hurricanes Katrina and Rita
Grade 8	8.4	Use geographic representations and historical data to analyze U.S. history, 1877- 2008
Grades 6- 8	6.6 / 7.6 / 8.6	Use primary and secondary sources to analyze content, evaluate claims and evidence, and compare accounts
Grades 6- 8	6.7 / 7.7 / 8.7	Construct claims supported by evidence, including cause-and-effect analysis
U.S. History	US.13.f	Effects of changes in immigration and migration within the U.S. after WWI, including the Great Migration
U.S. History	US.4	Use geographic representations and demographic data to analyze change over time

U.S. History	US.5	Use primary and secondary sources to analyze content, evaluate claims, and compare accounts
U.S. History	US.6	Construct claims supported by evidence; analyze causes and effects; evaluate counterclaims
U.S. History	US.18	Major U.S. events of the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Katrina)
World Geography	WG.8	How people have modified or adapted to the environment

Mississippi: College- and Career-Readiness Standards for Social Studies (2022)

Grade / Course	Code	Focus (summary)
Grade 6 (Civics and the World)	6.G.5.4	Push/pull factors that drive major migration patterns in the U.S. and world
Grade 6	6.G.7.5	How people respond to natural hazards
Mississippi Studies	MS.1.4	How Mississippi's geographic features and processes (including the Delta, the Great Flood of 1927, and Hurricane Katrina) shaped its development
Mississippi Studies	MS.7.2	Changes in Mississippi's economy in the decades after Reconstruction
U.S. History: 1877 to Present	USH.4.9	Domestic impact of WWI, including the origins of the Great Migration
U.S. History: 1877 to Present	USH.5.6	Impact of 1920s changes on the economy, society, and culture, including the Great Migration
U.S. History: 1877 to Present	USH.12.1	Key domestic issues since 1992, including Hurricane Katrina
Introduction to Geography	ITG.5.1 / ITG.5.2	Major U.S. migration streams; consequences of migration for origins and destinations

Introduction to Geography	ITG.1.2	Use maps and geospatial technologies to explain relationships among people, places, and environments
Advanced World Geography	AWG.5.3	Trace major migration patterns by distance, origin, cause, and time

Arkansas: Social Studies Academic Standards (2022)

Grade / Course	Code	Focus (summary)
Grade 8 (U.S. History, Era 7: 1890- 1930)	H.5.8.8	Reasons for and effects of 1920s social, economic, political, and cultural changes, including the Great Migration
Arkansas History (9-12)	H.5.ARH.5	Responses to natural disasters in Arkansas, including the Flood of 1927
Arkansas History (9-12)	H.5.ARH.12	Effects of social and cultural change on Arkansas's population, including demographic change in communities
African American History (9-12)	H.5.AAH.3	Actions and achievements of African Americans in the early 20th century, including the Great Migration

Common Core State Standards: Literacy in History/Social Studies, Speaking and Listening

Grade band	Code	Focus (summary)
6- 8	RH.6-8.1	Cite textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources

6- 8	RH.6-8.2	Determine central ideas of a source and summarize it accurately
6- 8	RH.6-8.7	Integrate visual information (including maps) with print text
6- 8	WHST.6-8.1	Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content
6- 8	SL.6.1 / SL.7.1 / SL.8.1	Engage in collaborative discussions
9- 10	RH.9-10.1	Cite textual evidence, attending to the date and origin of sources
9- 10	RH.9-10.3	Determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them
9- 10	RH.9-10.7	Integrate quantitative analysis (charts, data) with text
11- 12	RH.11-12.3	Evaluate explanations for events and decide which best fits the evidence
11- 12	RH.11-12.7	Integrate and evaluate multiple sources in diverse formats to address a question
9- 12	WHST.9-10.1 / WHST.11-12.1	Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content
9- 12	SL.9-10.1 / SL.11-12.1	Initiate and participate in collaborative discussions