

Clues Sheet

In the 1920s, American industry surged forward, employing tens of millions of the immigrants and rural Americans who flocked to the cities to find work. Railroads crisscrossed the country, delivering manufactured products, passengers, mail, and food. A railway station now served as its town's main gateway to the productive nation. At the same time, oceangoing steamers delivered American goods to the world.

Transportation has long been involved in the struggle for racial equality in America. In 1896, the Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision declared racial segregation legal, which led to the growth of "Jim Crow" laws. For the next half-century, the doctrine of "separate but equal" was the law of the land. Railroads employed African Americans even as they discriminated against them when they traveled.

The Pullman Company staffed its famous sleeping cars with black men and women. In fact, it employed more African Americans than any other single company in the country. Pullman porters were one of the first African American groups to form their own union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), in 1925. It was led by A. Philip Randolph. Many BSCP members were later active in civil rights movements in the 1940s and 1950s. For example, Pullman porter E. D. Nixon, a local NAACP official, helped plan the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott of 1955–56.



2-1 Locomotive 1401 (Smithsonian Institution #84-1 1402, photograph by Dane Penland)

This steam locomotive, built in 1926, traveled the Southern Railway, which connected New Orleans to Washington, D.C. The 1401 could haul 14 cars at 80 miles per hour. It was a workhorse for pulling passenger trains. The locomotive comprises two parts, an engine and a tender for carrying fuel and water for the boiler. Locomotive wheels were large in order to pull the heavy weight of the other cars at high speed. The engineer ran the locomotive and the fireman managed the boiler. Together they made sure the locomotive had the power to keep the train at the proper speed.



2-2 Conductor and engineer, 1929 (NMAH Transportation Collections)

The conductor is the "captain" of the train. He supervises the other train crew and is responsible for the safety of the passengers. The conductor determines when a train can depart a station. The engineer is responsible for following all the signal and speed restrictions along the route and knowing every hill, twist, and curve along the route. The conductor and the engineer need to synchronize their watches so they stay on schedule and avoid collisions.



2-3 Pullman dining car, 1920s (NMAH Transportation Collections)

The Pullman Company was the largest single employer of African American men in the United States. Pullman porters created a sense of luxury for travelers, as they made beds, shined shoes, and provided personal services. It was hard work, 400 hours a month compared to today's norm of 160 hours. Pullman porters were respected members of their communities, and because they traveled, they often provided information about work opportunities through newspaper job listings and knowing the living conditions in other states. This type of information was used by black families to guide them in their migrations north.



2-4 Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalog page, 1927 (NMAH Archives Center)

Sears, Roebuck was one of two big Chicago companies that used the railway mail service to deliver its products across America. The catalogs included every imaginable item, bringing both fashions and manufactured goods—from pitchforks to automobiles—to people across the country. Merchandise was stored in regionally located warehouses and then rushed to the customer by train.



2-5 The great migration north, 1920s (Courtesy of American Social History Project, New York)

This family moved from the South to find work in Chicago. If African Americans migrated by train, they had to suffer through "Jim Crow" conditions, sitting in a segregated passenger car that was the closest one to the locomotive. The ride was smoky and unpleasant. The Pullman porters were renowned for creating a sense of luxury for white train passengers, but such services were not available for the hundreds of thousands of black people who migrated from the South to the North.



2-6 Freightmen moving large boxes, 1920s (Courtesy of North Carolina Division of Archives and History)

Eighty percent of all intercity freight went by rail, and thousands of packages were sent every day by railway express. This railroad freight terminal was a distribution center for items leaving the region, such as cotton, lumber, and woven textiles, and for items arriving, such as coal, industrial parts, and clothing. A foreman often had to oversee the unloading of these boxes and make sure they were delivered to the correct customer.