



“Renton’s Hilltop Community” Reading Comprehension Questions

“Renton’s Hilltop Community” tells the story of the Renton Hilltop, a historically Black community in the Renton Highlands. The article discusses the neighborhood’s ties to mining, agriculture, and war industries while highlighting community culture and the lives and livelihoods of well-known Hilltop residents. It was written in 2007 as part of a project to document the history of the area and integrate it into Heritage Park, which was completed that same year.

This activity is designed for readers in 7th grade and above. Questions can be used for discussion or as writing prompts. [The original article from June 2007 can be found online at the Museum’s Newsletter Page.](#) This study guide has a companion piece, the “Renton’s Hilltop Community” Mapping and Property Records Activity, which can also be found on [our curricula page](#).

1. Why do you think families moved to the Hilltop community in the 1920s and 1930s?
2. Describe the connection between mining and the Hilltop community.
3. Why was agriculture important to members of the Hilltop community?
4. How did the Great Depression change urban life in Seattle?
5. Why did Irene Grayson and her family move to Renton? What is she known for in the community?
6. Between 1940 and 1950, Washington State’s African American population increased from 7,000 to 30,000. Why was there a large increase? Where did the newcomers settle in Renton?
7. According to the newsletter, what did Audrey Weathers experience as a young girl in the Hilltop community during the 1940s?

Essay Question: How did members of the Hilltop community provide for their families? What kinds of resources were available to them, and how did they use them?

Personal Essay Question: The residents of the Hilltop moved to Renton from other places throughout Washington and the United States. Interview an older family member about how they came to live where they are today. Where did they live before, and why did they relocate? How do they feel about the community they live in?



Answer Guide for Parents & Teachers

1. Why do you think families moved to the Hilltop community in the 1920s and 30s?

Black families who moved to this area from the South saw Renton Hilltop as a chance to get away from overt racial violence and intimidation, voter suppression, sharecropping, and poverty. The Renton Hilltop community, sometimes referred to as “the Country,” was also thought of as an escape from urban life for families who moved from Seattle. Located between Renton and Kenndale, the Hilltop was far enough away from major water sources and urban centers that it was not considered highly desirable land at the time. Because of this, it was not restricted to white families and therefore offered Black families a rare chance to own property. It was also an ideal location to raise children because families were surrounded by likeminded neighbors who created a strong sense of community and a shared culture.

2. Describe the connection between mining and the Hilltop community.

James and Dougherty Smith, the Hilltop’s first Black residents, were brothers who worked on and off in coal mines. As more Black workers migrated to the area to be employed in Newcastle’s mines, they found the Hilltop a convenient place to live because it was situated right off what was then sometimes called the “Renton to Newcastle” or “Renton to Issaquah” Road—today’s Sunset Highway. Income from mining allowed the workers to continually improve and build upon their homes.

3. Why was agriculture important to members of the Hilltop community?

Mining was not a dependable source of income for Black families. Availability of work in the mines depended on mine operators’ need for labor and their willingness to hire Black workers at a time when tensions were heightened due to white employees’ prejudices. Hilltop residents were alternately identified as miners or farmers on U.S. censuses, indicating that they lived off the land when there was no work available in the mines. During the Great Depression the ability to raise their own food became even more important. Families could sometimes earn extra income by selling what they raised and neighbors also shared what they had raised. Fruit, pork, beef, and chicken were among the foods residents cultivated on their land and shared with neighbors.

4. How did the Great Depression change urban life in Seattle?

In 1929, the Depression exacerbated urban tensions and poverty in Seattle. Families such as the Simms, the Franklins, and the Satterfields left Seattle for the Hilltop, which offered a rural experience but was close enough to the city that they could still commute if they found work there. Some were able to purchase their own land on the Hilltop, which would have been difficult if not impossible in Seattle.

5. Why did Irene Grayson and her family move to Renton? What is she known for in the community?

After Irene Grayson’s husband and son lost their jobs, she wanted to live someplace where they could raise their own food. After four years of payments, the Graysons owned ten acres and a log cabin they built themselves. Mother Irene was well-known for the founding of one of the first African American churches in the Highlands.



For additional biographical information about Ms. Grayson, we encourage you to visit RHM's *What Difference Do Renton Women Make?* online exhibit:

<https://www.rentonwa.gov/cms/One.aspx?portalId=7922741&pageId=17117052>

6. Between 1940 and 1950, Washington State's African American population increased from 7,000 to 30,000. Why was there a large increase? Where did the newcomers settle in Renton?

The large increase in Washington's Black population between 1940 and 1950 was due to the World War II employment boom in ship and aircraft manufacturing and steel production. Boeing was one of the companies that recruited African Americans in the South to live and work in Renton. Some lived in the public housing being rapidly developed at the time by the Renton Housing Authority to house war workers, which was referred to as "the projects." Black families who were able to purchase their own property often chose to do so in the Hilltop neighborhood.

7. According to the newsletter, what did Audrey Weathers experience as a young girl in the Hilltop community during the 1940s?

Audrey Weathers moved back and forth with her parents and four brothers and sisters from their home in Seattle to their home on Union Avenue in Renton during the war, while her father Nathaniel worked in the shipyards. She and her friends saw Sherman tanks being tested North of Greenwood Cemetery by PACCAR. She also remembers her family participating in the exchange of homegrown meat and produce with her neighbors.

Essay Question: How did members of the Hilltop community provide for their families? What kinds of resources were available to them, and how did they use them?

Sample Answer: Mining was an important source of income for early members of the Hilltop community. Because the Hilltop was located along the "Renton to Newcastle" or "Renton to Issaquah" Road, residents could commute to the Newcastle mines for work. The income earned from mining was used to expand residents' properties. For example, James Smith added a garage, a brooder house for chickens, and a smoke house to his family's property using the money he earned from mining. At the beginning of World War II, the availability of war work in Renton and Seattle also drew families to the neighborhood. Nathaniel Weathers, for example, worked in the shipyards during the war. Some members of the community held other professions, such as Clyde Barfield, who worked 35 years for the Howard S. Wright Construction Company.

Because it was a rural community, the Hilltop neighborhood also had access to local agriculture and livestock. Fruit trees and fields provided families with their own fruit and vegetables. Families also raised pigs, cows, and chickens for the meat and dairy products they provided. Some members of the community offered services to their neighbors, such as smoking meat products. Families often traded their homegrown produce with their neighbors, and agricultural products could be sold for a profit. For example, Emmett Simms, who moved to the area in the 1920s, sold vegetables via horse-drawn wagon and was well known for his barbecue pit.



Personal Essay Question: The residents of the Hilltop moved to Renton from other places throughout Washington and the United States. Interview an older member of your family or community about how they came to live where they are today. Where did they live before, and why did they relocate? How do they feel about the community they live in?

This question will turn students into interviewers. They may write a summary of their findings or use a script format. It may be helpful to have a discussion about how historians conduct oral histories with senior members of the community to learn about our past. Encourage students to draw their own conclusions about how communities form, and to compare and contrast their subject's experiences with the experiences of the Hilltop residents in the article.

Supplemental Resources (all available at no cost)

Historically Black Communities in Washington State

From Memphis and Mogadishu: The History of African Americans in King County, Washington, 1858-2014: A detailed summary of King County's Black history, starting with the arrival of its first Black citizen, Manuel Lopes, in 1858. It also covers topics such as Black miners, work opportunities for the growing Black community during World War II, the Civil Rights movement, and educational reforms during the 1990s. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/perspectives-african-american-history/memphis-and-mogadishu-history-african-americans-martin-luther-king-county-washington-1858-2014/>

Black Heritage Society photo collection online at UW: This collection of photos hosted online by the University of Washington highlights members of Washington's Black communities from the 1880s through the mid-20th century. <https://digitalcollections.lib.washington.edu/digital/collection/imsblackhs/search/order/title/ad/asc/colsuppress/1>

"End of Old Days" short film: In the 19th century, there were few Black families living in Seattle, but those who did—known as the "Black Victorians"—attained middle-class status because they were less restricted by white Seattleites than the larger Native, Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese populations. As Black citizens left the South and moved to Seattle between 1940-50, however, white Seattleites enacted more explicitly segregationist policies, pushing Black families into the Central District. This film is part of the University of Washington's [Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project](http://seattlecivilrights.org/) website, which has other free resources such as lesson plans and a number of primary sources. https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/film_end_days.htm

Seattle Times: Seattle's Vanishing Black Community: In the 1960s and 1970s, 70% of the population of Seattle's Central District was Black. Now, Black residents only make up about 20% of the neighborhood. This *Seattle Times* article from 2016 examines the process of gentrification that drove up the cost of living and pushed Black Seattleites out of their homes. It includes interviews with longtime neighborhood residents. [https://www.seattletimes.com/pacific-nw-magazine/seattles-vanishing-black-community/](http://www.seattletimes.com/pacific-nw-magazine/seattles-vanishing-black-community/)



Virtual Tour of Renton's African American Historical Sites: This is John Houston's personal account of his life in the Hilltop community, filmed at Renton History Museum on Feb. 7, 2020. Houston recalls his childhood, prominent Hilltop community members, and the hardship his family faced when land developers sought to remove them from their property. He is accompanied throughout the one-hour lecture by Benita Horn, the City's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion specialist.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WE_shoyMcKg

Critical Thinking Questions: Why do you think King County attracted an increasing number of Black Americans during the 20th century? How was Seattle's Black community formed, and how has it changed over the years? What challenges do they face today? How do photos, newspapers, and firsthand accounts give us different insights into the past?

Historically Black Communities throughout the United States

The African-American Migration Story: This informational web page ties into PBS's Fall 2013 documentary series, *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross*. It explains through simple text and visuals the varied migrations of African Americans throughout history; from forced relocation due to the slave trade to the search for opportunities and community during the 20th century.

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/on-african-american-migrations/>

Washington Post - "All-Black Towns Across America: Life was hard but full of promise:" In the 50 years following the Civil War, all-Black towns in the United States began to flourish. Unfortunately, their history was often not recorded due to the apathy of white Americans at the time. Many of these towns were not incorporated and have since disappeared. This *Washington Post* article shares some of what historians do currently know about a number of Black communities that were formed in the latter half of the 19th century.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/a-list-of-well-known-black-towns/2015/03/27/9f21ca42-cdc4-11e4-a2a7-9517a3a70506_story.html

9 Historic Black Neighborhoods That Celebrate Black Excellence: Read about the history of nine historically Black neighborhoods throughout the United States, and the successes and tragedies they endured. Many have ties to famous Black Americans such as Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Billie Holiday, and Langston Hughes, and were hubs for commerce and culture. The article also mentions some of the historic preservation work currently going on in these areas.

https://savingplaces.org/stories/9-historic-black-neighborhoods-that-celebrate-black-excellence#.YS_tRZ1Kjcs

Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service: *The Negro Motorist Green Book*: This online exhibit offers an immersive look at the reality of travel for African Americans in mid-century America and how the annual guide served as an indispensable resource for the nation's rising African American middle class and evidence of a vibrant business class.

<https://negromotoristgreenbook.si.edu/>



Redlining and Segregation

In the 1960s, sociologist John McKnight coined the term "redlining." Redlining refers to discriminatory lending practices that were officially endorsed by the U.S. government, in which banks were discouraged from allowing Black families to take out mortgages to buy homes in suburban neighborhoods. Many neighborhoods also had property covenants, a legal device that restricted the sale of homes based on race. Maps made for mortgage lenders outlined Black neighborhoods in red to indicate places where mortgages should not be sold, hence the term "redlining." Redlining was enforced as late as the 1970s, and its effects are still felt today.

Consider the following quote from an oral history interview with Renton resident John Houston, who grew up in the Hilltop Community in the 1950s and 60s:

"It's still puzzling to me that the only African Americans living in the City of Renton settled on that one street. So, it wasn't called redlining at that time, but it definitely showed a type of redlining. My parents didn't know anybody on that street, and other people didn't prior to them moving there, but the realtors or whoever sold the land—it just seemed like they were directed to that area. And it was the resilience of those people—of my parents and the other families that lived on that street. I think it was thought as, "Well, we're gonna sell land to you people in this area; nobody else wants it." It was a swampy area. There was a creek running through there. There was no septic systems; some had no water systems. But they survived it. They came through it."

—John Houston Oral History Interview, March 7th, 2020

The following websites demonstrate the concept of redlining in various ways:

Seattle's Ugly Past: Segregation in Our Neighborhoods: As a result of redlining and racially restrictive housing covenants, Seattle was 92% white in 1960, with 90% of Black families restricted to the Central district. This *Seattle Magazine* article from 2013 gives a history of redlining and segregation in Seattle. It also brings up some turning points for integration, such as the Yesler Terrace public housing community and the open housing ordinance passed after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

<https://seattlemag.com/article/seattles-ugly-past-segregation-our-neighborhoods>

A 'Forgotten History' Of How the U.S. Government Segregated America: This article and accompanying audio from NPR include an interview with Richard Rothstein, author of *The Color of Law*. Rothstein details the government regulations that racially segregated the country and explains how redlining created lasting inequities that persist today.

<https://www.npr.org/2017/05/03/526655831/a-forgotten-history-of-how-the-u-s-government-segregated-america>

Interactive Redlining Map – USA: This U.S. map shows how redlining worked in major cities by overlaying historic redlining maps and showing the accompanying neighborhood descriptions created by agents of the federal government's Home Owners' Loan Corporation between 1935 and 1940. The language very explicitly denotes areas populated by Black, Southern and Eastern European, and/or Jewish residents as "hazardous." This is especially egregious in the Northeast, but can also be seen in nearby Portland and Seattle as well.

<https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=12/47.576/-122.368&city=seattle-wa>



Interactive Redlining Map - Seattle/King County: Dots show some of the areas where housing was restricted by race. Clicking the red dots on the map of King County will show the text of the property covenant or newspaper ad that described the restriction. It covers some of the suburban areas that the previous map does not. https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/covenants_map.htm

Critical Thinking Questions: Define the term “redlining” in your own words. Who were the parties responsible for creating the mechanisms that segregated U.S. cities and suburbs? When and how were the restrictions removed? What were the long-term effects of redlining and segregation? How can looking at the interactive redlining maps help us to better understand our communities today?