THE
NIAGARA
MOVEMENT
the Early Battle for Civil Rights
The Niagara Movement: The Early Battle for Civil Rights

Discussion Guide

The Niagara Movement: The Early Battle for Civil Rights is a one-hour documentary focusing on the formation and impact of the first civil rights movement of the twentieth century. Protests about the ongoing struggle for equality in America has roots going back more than a century. Central to the story of the Niagara Movement are the roles played by two of the most dynamic Black leaders of the time – Booker T. Washington and W.E.B Du Bois. Their lives intersected at a critical junction when leading Black activists debated how to obtain civil rights. The principles that drove the creation of the Niagara Movement crystallized Du Bois' radical stance to take up the fight for equal rights and were largely seen as a direct affront to the philosophy espoused by Washington.

Du Bois condemned Washington for his lowered expectations for Black Americans. William Monroe Trotter, editor of the Boston Guardian, publicly reprimanded Washington. Du Bois, Trotter, and others issued a call to a select group of Black men who opposed Washington’s accommodationist stance. Trotter is the least known of the three key characters in the film, but no less important. Born to a wealthy Black Boston merchant, Trotter obtained a Harvard education and founded a successful real estate practice. He was principled to a fault, refusing to allow compromise of any kind when it came to protesting injustice against Black Americans.

Washington, who opposed Black opposition to the status quo, controlled the Black press and funding from white philanthropists came to him alone. Consequently, the Niagara Movement was plagued with internal conflict and financial problems. And although the Movement was disbanded only four years after its inception, its impact and legacy have proven long-lasting. The Niagara Movement was a critical turning point in fighting inequality, and it laid the cornerstone of the modern American Civil Rights Movement. Its influence and legacy are wide: it changed the tone and approach to Black protest in America, it created tactics that would be used by the NAACP, such as fighting in the courts for integration, and it influenced the ideology of the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and the Black Lives Matter movement of the 21st century.
Community Discussion Guide
This guide can be used as a resource to inform and prepare community-based facilitators for screening *The Niagara Movement: The Early Battle for Civil Rights*. Today, activists are still demanding justice and a more equitable world. This documentary and accompanying resources will help community members look beyond the story of the movement’s formation and legacy to raise larger questions about why the need continues for people of color to protest on the grounds of civil rights and whether new forms of protest should be developed in the twenty-first century.

This companion guide will help you explore the key figures that were part of the Niagara Movement, as well as important topics like the activities of women at the time of the movement, advocacy, the involvement of the Black Press, and where we stand today. Find tips for organizing a successful event, including facilitating productive dialogue around the film. You will find suggestions for classrooms, schools, or community organizations to initiate discussion using *The Niagara Movement: The Early Battle for Civil Rights*. Questions are provided as conversation starters for use by classrooms and communities.

Community Engagement
To extend the reach of *The Niagara Movement: The Early Battle for Civil Rights*, community discussions can take place that will spark conversation around the history of the struggle for equity among Black Americans and how that relates to present day challenges and activism. Partnering with local and national advocacy organizations and community leaders will help to inform people more about this important, and still very relevant, topic.

Screenings and Discussions
Viewing *The Niagara Movement: The Early Battle for Civil Rights* can be a great tool to raise awareness of who was involved and how the civil rights movement came to be. People will recognize some of the figures involved, but not all. Hidden figures of the movement will be pointed out, including significant female members such as Mary Talbert and Barbara Pope.

Many of the concepts and visuals in the documentary may be triggering. Keep in mind that the film is not meant for young children. Language in your screening and discussion invitations and promotion should reflect this. For example, you could include, “This event is intended for ages 14 and above. It includes video and discussion of sensitive matters.”

Whatever the setting or audience, using any of the following suggestions can lead to an engaging and powerful event. Follow the steps below for an impactful dialogue opportunity.

- Find a location where *The Niagara Movement: The Early Battle for Civil Rights* can be screened – community centers, schools, or libraries can all be great community settings that provide accessibility.
- The screening location should have access to the internet if the video on the website will be used, access to a DVD player is needed if playing from a DVD.
- Virtual screenings can expand the reach of your audience - internet access will still be needed to access the video.
- When planning a community discussion around the documentary, inviting related speakers to be a part of the event is encouraged.
- Follow the screening of *The Niagara Movement: The Early Battle for Civil Rights* with an open and respectful discussion.
Guest speakers or a panel of experts can be very useful for discussions. Some guests to consider are local or national racial equity advocates, historians, higher education scholars, NAACP members, or other representatives from powerful movements such as Black Lives Matter to draw comparisons. There are many local and national organizations that can be used as a resource for partnering with or securing guest speakers. Reach out to members of your own community who may be able to help out locally. Remember that even good ideas usually have opposing viewpoints. Open discussion should include multiple perspectives and respectful listening.

The Niagara Movement: The Early Battle for Civil Rights may be shown in its entirety or, if time is limited, a selected chapter or two may be screened. Below is the list of chapters with descriptions and approximate run time.

**Chapters and Descriptions**

**Introduction (approximately 3 minutes)**
Viewers are introduced to Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and William Monroe Trotter, all of whom were influential African American leaders during the early 20th century. Their contrasting responses to segregation and violence inflicted upon African Americans directly led to the formation of the Niagara Movement in 1905. Even though it was short-lived, the movement had a major impact on the civil rights struggle of the 1960s and today.

**Life Under Jim Crow (approximately 3 ½ minutes)**
The turn of the century was a period of progress and prosperity in America, but this did not extend to African Americans. Any rights African Americans had gained during Reconstruction were stripped away during the Jim Crow Era. They were terrorized by the constant threat of lynching in addition to their political oppression. W.E.B. Du Bois and other leaders wanted to take direct action, while Booker T. Washington favored another approach.

**Booker T. Washington (approximately 7 ½ minutes)**
Booker T. Washington was born into slavery in Virginia, but later gained his freedom and earned a college degree. He founded the Tuskegee Institute and advocated for education as the path to liberation. His speech in Atlanta in 1895 earned him national acclaim. He utilized the black press to spread his message of financial independence and survival through compromise. Washington maintained this stance even after the Supreme Court upheld Plessy v. Ferguson.

**W.E.B. Du Bois (approximately 7 minutes)**
W.E.B. Du Bois grew up in relative freedom in Massachusetts and earned multiple college degrees from Fisk and Harvard, including a PhD. He agreed with Booker T. Washington's philosophy of racial progress until the horrific lynching of Sam Hose. Du Bois began to directly challenge racist stereotypes of African Americans, starting with his exhibit at the Pan-American Exposition. However, he was still hesitant at this time to publicly challenge Washington's ideas.
William Monroe Trotter (approximately 3 ½ minutes)
William Monroe Trotter was an accomplished young man and, like Du Bois, studied at Harvard. Both Trotter and Du Bois joined the Afro-American Council, but felt it was not radical enough under Washington’s influence. In 1901, Trotter co-founded The Guardian newspaper which gained wide circulation. At this time, Booker T. Washington controlled most Black newspapers, but Trotter chose to use his paper to openly criticize Washington and his policies.

War of Ideas (approximately 5 ½ minutes)
Booker T. Washington did not tolerate criticism and unsuccessfully sued Trotter’s newspaper. When Washington gave a speech in Boston, Trotter and his followers disrupted the event. In the chaos that ensued, Trotter was arrested and spent time in jail. This outraged Du Bois and he publicly separated himself from Washington at last. The incident in Boston not only led to an alliance between Du Bois and Trotter but was also the catalyst for the Niagara Movement.

The First Meeting (approximately 6 ½ minutes)
Du Bois organized the first meeting of the Niagara Movement in Fort Erie, Canada, due to its proximity to Buffalo. Booker T. Washington actively prevented Black newspapers from reporting on the movement. All 29 attendees at the first meeting were elite Black men. The movement initially excluded female members, ignoring the long history of Black women as skilled political organizers. By the end of that year, the Niagara Movement had chapters across 34 states.

Barbara Pope (approximately 5 minutes)
W.E.B. Du Bois advocated for the inclusion of women at the movement’s second meeting in 1906. Trotter objected but was outvoted. Barbara Pope was arrested for sitting at the front of a train and the Niagara Movement supported her lawsuit. The judge ruled in her favor, which was a major victory for the movement; however, Pope suffered personally and later committed suicide. The Niagara Movement realized that the courts would be a powerful tool for dismantling segregation.
Leaders Divided (approximately 7 minutes)
The Atlanta riots in 1906 inspired many African Americans, including W.E.B. Du Bois, to take a more confrontational approach to fighting racism. The movement’s annual meeting in 1907 turned out to be its last. In addition to the movement’s financial problems, Du Bois and William Trotter found it increasingly more difficult to work together. Trotter left in 1908 and while the movement fell apart shortly after, it laid the foundation for future civil rights organization.

Rebirth and Legacy (approximately 6 minutes)
W.E.B. Du Bois spoke at the meeting in 1909 where the founding of the NAACP was proposed. This new organization was interracial and included women from its founding. The actions of the Niagara Movement directly influenced the strategies used by the NAACP. While the Niagara Movement itself lasted only a few years, its leaders have inspired generations of activists. The fight for full citizenship rights and against white supremacy continues even today.

After watching The Niagara Movement: The Early Battle for Civil Rights, invite your guests to share their thoughts on the program and how it relates to their own work or experiences, allowing time for questions and answers from participants. To continue the discussion, whether with panelists or participants, the following suggested questions can be used.
Discussion Prompts
These questions invite participants to think about their own experiences related to the film topics and themes, and share these experiences with the group. The facilitator helps participants recognize how their experiences are alike and different, and why.

General Questions:
• Characters like W.E.B. Du Bois or Booker T. Washington are frequently portrayed as acting alone, but every leader depends on other people and their community for support. Who has shaped and supported you in ways that resonate with the film?
• Before the civil rights movement, there were many leaders working toward equality. How much of this early battle for civil rights did you know previously? Why is it important to recognize all of these early efforts?
• The early leaders approached advocacy from different perspectives. Why is it important in any movement to listen to multiple perspectives? What perspectives have helped your new learning?
• What does fighting for civil rights mean to you?
• What makes something worth fighting for to you?
• Would you have done anything differently than W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, or William Trotter?
• What were some strategies used to advocate and fight for civil rights? What strategies does the Black Lives Matter Movement use? How are they similar and different?
• What shocked or surprised you the most about the Niagara Movement? Was there anything that stood out to you in particular?
• What does advocacy mean to you? Who can be an advocate?
• What are topics you would advocate for?
• What are ways to advocate for marginalized communities? How can you advocate for your peers or community members?
• How can young people advocate for an issue they care about? Who can they rely on to be an ally?
• Can you connect past and current inequalities — how is race still a factor when looking at equal rights for all people?
• What were the long-term impacts of the Niagara Movement?

This dialogue may reveal differences as well as similarities between audience members, it is important to end the screening by reinforcing a sense of community. Reflection questions help participants examine what they’ve learned about themselves and each other and voice the impact that the dialogue has had on them. This is also the time for participants to think about what they would like to do next and how they would like to carry this dialogue further into their lives and communities.

Reflection Questions:
• What stood out to you about today’s conversation? What did you hear that was new? What do you want to think about more?
• Who do you want to share this film and conversation with?
• What are additional resources you would recommend people learn from?
• What can you do in your own community to progress the ideas of equity?
Classroom Resources

Using these resources, educators and facilitators can effectively inform classrooms about this historic movement and how it relates to the struggles of Black America today. Conversations about where we have come from and where we go next can be had to continue the movement towards equity.

Through the stories of icons, such as W.E.B Du Bois, William Monroe Trotter, and Booker T. Washington, this chapter of history can explain the foundation of the struggles for equity that Black Americans continue to deal with today. In the classroom, archival film footage, photographs, newspaper articles, pamphlets, popular period music can be examined. In addition, other primary sources such as personal correspondence, essays, speeches, books, and autobiographies that both Du Bois and Washington left behind can be valuable learning tools. Lesson plans were developed for middle and high school students (grades 6 - 12), that meet National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies. Some of the Niagara Movement and documentary themes covered are documenting history, civil rights, activism, marginalization, and unity. All curriculum resources are available on the program website and PBS LearningMedia, a free national platform that provides digital learning tools for K-12 classrooms. PBS LearningMedia has a national reach of 1.8 million educators, over 30 million students, and a digital library of more than 118,000 classroom-ready resources.

Explore the *The Niagara Movement: The Early Battle for Civil Rights* collection on PBS LearningMedia here: