Concise Summaries: Major Challenges in African American History.
These summaries are provided as a resource for students, who should research to expand their knowledge of the challenges that African Americans faced.

Segregated America

After the Civil War, millions of formerly enslaved African Americans hoped to join the larger society as full and equal citizens. Although some white Americans welcomed them, others used people's ignorance, racism, and self-interest to sustain and spread racial divisions. By 1900, new laws and old customs in the North and the South had created a segregated society that condemned Americans of color to second-class citizenship.

Denied public educational resources, people of color strengthened their own schools and communities and fought for the resources that had been unjustly denied to their children. Parents’ demands for better schools became a crucial part of the larger struggle for civil rights.

...After the Civil War, southern states ultimately created a dual educational system based on race. These separate schools were anything but equal.

Yet, the commitment of African American teachers and parents to education never faltered. They established a tradition of educational self-help and were among the first southerners to campaign for universal public education. They welcomed the support of the Freedmen’s Bureau, white charities, and missionary societies. Black communities, many desperately poor, also dug deep into their own resources to build and maintain schools that met their needs and reflected their values.

“We went every day about nine o’clock, with our books wrapped in paper to prevent the police or white persons from seeing them...After school we left the same way we entered, one by one, when we would go to the square about a block from school, and wait for each other.”
—Susie King, who attended a secret school in Savannah, Georgia

Source—and to learn more: National Museum of American History
http://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/1-segregated/segregated-america.html
Jim Crow Laws

From the 1880s into the 1960s, a majority of American states enforced segregation through "Jim Crow" laws (so called after a black character in minstrel shows). From Delaware to California, and from North Dakota to Texas, many states (and cities, too) could impose legal punishments on people for consorting with members of another race. The most common types of laws forbade intermarriage and ordered business owners and public institutions to keep their black and white clientele separated. Here is a sampling of laws from various states.

Nurses: No person or corporation shall require any white female nurse to nurse in wards or rooms in hospitals, either public or private, in which negro men are placed. *Alabama*

Buses: All passenger stations in this state operated by any motor transportation company shall have separate waiting rooms or space and separate ticket windows for the white and colored races. *Alabama*

Railroads: The conductor of each passenger train is authorized and required to assign each passenger to the car or the division of the car, when it is divided by a partition, designated for the race to which such passenger belongs. *Alabama*

Restaurants: It shall be unlawful to conduct a restaurant or other place for the serving of food in the city, at which white and colored people are served in the same room, unless such white and colored persons are effectually separated by a solid partition extending from the floor upward to a distance of seven feet or higher, and unless a separate entrance from the street is provided for each compartment. *National Park Service*

http://www.nps.gov/malu/forteachers/jim_crow_laws.htm
African Americans and World War I

World War I was a transformative moment in African-American history. What began as a seemingly distant European conflict soon became an event with revolutionary implications for the social, economic, and political future of black people. The war directly impacted all African Americans, male and female, northerner and southerner, soldier and civilian. Migration, military service, racial violence, and political protest combined to make the war years one of the most dynamic periods of the African-American experience. Black people contested the boundaries of American democracy, demanded their rights as American citizens, and asserted their very humanity in ways both subtle and dramatic. Recognizing the significance of World War I is essential to developing a full understanding of modern African-American history and the struggle for black freedom.


African Americans in World War II

African Americans served bravely and with distinction in every theater of World War II, while simultaneously struggling for their own civil rights from ‘the world’s greatest democracy.’ Although the United States Armed Forces were officially segregated until 1948, WWII laid the foundation for post-war integration of the military....

The Army Air Force also established several African American fighter and bomber groups. The famous “Tuskegee Airmen” of the 332nd Fighter Group became part of the 15th Air Force, flying group support missions over Anzio and escorting bombers over Southern Italy. The Tuskegee Airmen flew more than 15,000 sorties May 1943 and June 1945. Bomber crews often requested to be escorted by these ‘Redtails,’ a nickname acquired from the painted tails of Tuskegee fighter planes. Sixty-six Tuskegee Airmen died in combat.

Stephen Ambrose identified the lamentable American irony of WWII, writing, “The world’s greatest democracy fought the world’s greatest racist with a segregated army” (Ambrose, Citizen Soldier). During the global conflict, African American leaders and organizations established the ‘Double V’ campaign, calling for a victory against the enemy overseas and victory against racism at home. This new black consciousness and the defiant rejection of unjustifiable racism planted important sees for the post-War civil rights movement.

The Great Migration

Between 1914 and 1920, roughly 500,000 black southerners packed their bags and headed to the North, fundamentally transforming the social, cultural, and political landscape of cities such as Chicago, New York, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Detroit. The Great Migration would reshape black America and the nation as a whole.

Black southerners faced a host of social, economic, and political challenges that prompted their migration to the North. The majority of black farmers labored as sharecroppers, remained in perpetual debt, and lived in dire poverty. Their condition worsened in 1915–16 as a result of a boll weevil infestation that ruined cotton crops throughout the South. These economic obstacles were made worse by social and political oppression. By the time of the war, most black people had been disfranchised, effectively stripped of their right to vote through both legal and extralegal means.

Jim Crow segregation, legitimized by the Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) Supreme Court ruling, forced black people to use separate and usually inferior facilities. The southern justice system systematically denied them equal protection under the law and condoned the practice of vigilante mob violence. As an aspiring migrant from Alabama wrote in a letter to the Chicago Defender, "[I] am in the darkness of the south and [I] am trying my best to get out."

Wartime opportunities in the urban North gave hope to such individuals. The American industrial economy grew significantly during the war. However, the conflict also cut off European immigration and reduced the pool of available cheap labor. Unable to meet demand with existing European immigrants and white women alone, northern businesses increasingly looked to black southerners to fill the void. In turn, the prospect of higher wages and improved working conditions prompted thousands of black southerners to abandon their agricultural lives and start anew in major industrial centers. Black women remained by and large confined to domestic work, while men for the first time in significant numbers made entryways into the northern manufacturing, packinghouse, and automobile industries.

...the Great Migration was a social movement propelled by black people and their desires for a better life. The Chicago Defender, which circulated throughout the South, implored black people to break free from their oppression and take advantage of opportunities in the North. Even more influential were the testimonials and letters of the migrants themselves.

Migrants relied on informal networks of family and friends to facilitate their move to the North. Individuals would often leave to scout out conditions, secure a job, and find living arrangements, then send for the rest of their family. Word of mouth provided aspiring migrants with crucial information about where to relocate, how to get there, and how best to earn a living. This sense of community eased a black migrant's transition to city life.

Source and Learn More: Africana Age, New York Public Library
http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-world-war-i.html
The Great Depression and African Americans

The problems of the Great Depression affected virtually every group of Americans. No group was harder hit than African Americans, however. By 1932, approximately half of black Americans were out of work. In some Northern cities, whites called for blacks to be fired from any jobs as long as there were whites out of work. Racial violence again became more common, especially in the South. Lynchings, which had declined to eight in 1932, surged to 28 in 1933.

Although most African Americans traditionally voted Republican, the election of President Franklin Roosevelt began to change voting patterns. Roosevelt entertained African-American visitors at the White House and was known to have a number of black advisors. According to historian John Hope Franklin, many African Americans were excited by the energy with which Roosevelt began tackling the problems of the Depression and gained "a sense of belonging they had never experienced before" from his fireside chats.

Still, discrimination occurred in New Deal housing and employment projects, and President Roosevelt, for political reasons, did not back all of the legislation favored by such groups as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). When the U.S. entered World War II, labor leader A. Philip Randolph threatened to organize a march on Washington to protest job discrimination in the military and other defense-related activities. In response, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, stating that all persons, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin, would be allowed to participate fully in the defense of the United States.

To find additional sources on race relations in the 1930s and 1940s, search American Memory using such terms as prejudice, discrimination, segregation, Afro-Americans, and race relations.

Source and to Learn More: Library of Congress
http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/depwwii/race/
The Struggle for Civil Rights

The movement for African American civil rights began long before the Brown decision and continues long after. Still, the defeat of the separate-but-equal legal doctrine undercut one of the major pillars of white supremacy in America. In the decades that followed, a heroic ongoing campaign for civil rights has lifted the nation closer to its ideals of freedom.

Source and to learn more: National Museum of American History http://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/6-legacy/achieving-equality.html

Many of us take our right to vote as a given, forgetting that some struggled to attain that right. This, the first of two posts exploring the work of two groups to gain full voting rights, will take a look at primary sources from the Library of Congress that document the long road toward the full enfranchisement of African Americans.

The original Constitution of the United States was nearly mute on voting rights, ceding them to the states to determine. The 15th Amendment to the Constitution confers voting rights on African Americans, declaring that “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

However, many states got around that by imposing poll taxes, literacy tests, and other restrictive practices, sometimes known as “Jim Crow” laws. Source and to Learn More: Library of Congress http://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2012/10/voting-rights-the-full-enfranchisement-of-african-americans/
The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

On August 28, 1963, more than 250,000 people came to the Reflecting Pool and the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. This march has become famous for the “I Have a Dream” speech presented by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and for the theme of ensuring the economic and civil rights of African Americans.

Primary sources from the Library of Congress can help students learn more about the March, including the fact that it was also a labor protest for a higher minimum wage, job training for the unemployed, and broadening the Fair Labor Standards act.

...Labor leader A. Philip Randolph wrote to NAACP director Walter White suggesting a mass protest against discrimination in defense industries and the armed forces. To attempt to stop the march, Franklin D. Roosevelt scheduled a meeting with White, Randolph, and several other government officials. After that meeting, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802, which banned discrimination in defense industries receiving government contracts. In addition, the Fair Employment Practices Committee was set up to monitor hiring practices.

Sources and to Learn More: Library of Congress

http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/naacp/the-civil-rights-era.html?loclr=blogtea#obj23