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James Weldon Johnson

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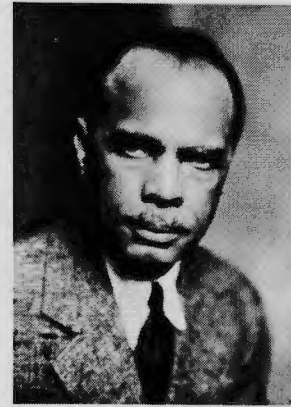
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Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



James Weldon Johnson

Songwriter, poet, novelist, journalist, critic, autobiographer, lawyer, diplomat, and civil rights activist, James William Johnson, much like his contemporary W. E. B. Du Bois, was an individual whose life spanned several historical and literary periods. Born during the era of Reconstruction on June 17, 1871, in Jacksonville, Florida, Johnson was imbued with a diverse set of talents. The second child and first son of the three children born to James and Helen Louise Dillet Johnson, his given middle name was William, which he changed to Weldon in 1913.

Johnson inherited his ancestors' amalgamation of productive energy and service to community, as exhibited by his maternal grandfather's longevity in Bahamian public service, where he was a member of the House of Assembly for thirty years. His father, James, Sr., worked as the headwaiter of the St. James Hotel in Jacksonville, and his mother taught in the Jacksonville public schools for many years. After completing the eighth grade at Jacksonville's Stanton Grammar School, James W. Johnson entered the preparatory school and later the college division of Atlanta University, from where he was graduated in 1894. In 1895, the same year that Booker T. Washington delivered his Atlanta Compromise speech, Johnson founded the *Daily American* in Jacksonville, a weekly newspaper committed to reporting on matters relevant to African Americans. Although the paper was extant for only a year, the *Daily American* addressed racial injustice and stressed a self-help philosophy that echoed Booker T. Washington's ethos. Johnson then became principal of Stanton School, and at the same time studied law; in 1898 he became the first African American to pass the bar exam in Florida. While at Stanton, he and his brother, musician and composer J. Rosamond Johnson, wrote the words and music to "Lift Every Voice and Sing," commemorating the birthdate of Abraham Lincoln. The song was first performed by Stanton schoolchildren in 1900, and would later be adapted by the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), subsequently becoming known as the "Negro National Anthem."

"Lift Every Voice and Sing" was not the only song on which the Johnson brothers collaborated. In 1899, they spent the summer in New York City; there they sold their first popular song, "Louisiana Lize," and began writing and composing in earnest. In 1902, James Weldon Johnson resigned his position as principal of Stanton School and the brothers left their hometown to join Bob Cole, a young songwriter they met while in New York. The trio became the successful Broadway songwriting team of Cole and the Johnson Brothers. Over the next few years, Johnson was largely responsible for the lyrics of such hit songs as "Nobody's Lookin' but de Owl and de Moon" (1901), "Under the Bamboo Tree" (1902), and "Congo Love Song" (1903).

While in New York, Johnson became involved in politics and sought to further his education. In 1904, he served as treasurer for the Colored Republican Club. Around the same time, he began to study literature at Columbia University, under professor, critic, and novelist Brander Matthews, and he ended his role in the Cole/Johnson musical partnership to pursue a life as a writer. Actively involved in the Harlem Renaissance as an author and as a supporter of young talent, Johnson emboldened writers and other artists to look at and draw upon the life experiences in American Black communities for their artistic ingenuity. Two years later, Theodore Roosevelt appointed him as the United States consul in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela through the influence of Booker T. Washington. Fluent in Spanish and French, Johnson was the first American Black to serve as the United States consul to Venezuela and Nicaragua. Johnson married his wife, Grace Nail, in New York City in 1910, and she joined her husband at his post in Nicaragua. In 1912 revolution broke out in that country, and Johnson's role in aiding U.S. Marines in

defeating the rebels drew high praise from Washington. It was during his tenure in the consul corps that Johnson wrote *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, published anonymously in 1912. Johnson's novel grabbed renewed attention when he revealed in 1927 the book as a work of fiction. Because the reading public associated the novel's hero with Johnson, he deemed it necessary to pen his autobiography *Along this Way*, in 1933. Johnson's political life fused with his creative curiosities and personified his life as an artist and activist.

Because he felt there would be little opportunity for an American Black in the newly elected Democratic administration of Woodrow Wilson, Johnson left the Consular Service in 1913. He joined the staff of the NAACP in 1915, and just one year later became the first African American to serve as field secretary and later as executive secretary of the NAACP. He advanced his own ideas on reducing the maltreatment of minorities in America. As executive secretary of the NAACP, Johnson organized the Manhattan Silent March of 1917 to protest lynching. During his tenure with the NAACP, Johnson led a national campaign against lynching that garnered significant congressional support in the form of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill of 1921, a bill that would have made lynching a national crime. However, because of the lack of support in the U. S. Senate, the Anti-Lynching Bill failed.

Johnson continued writing throughout the 1920s, editing the first anthology of African American poetry, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* in 1922, followed by *The Book of Negro Spirituals* in 1925, a two-volume collection of sacred songs he co-edited with his brother J. Rosamond. *The Book of Negro Spirituals* also contained an introductory essay in which the Johnsons traced the origins and importance of this earliest of African American art forms. Johnson also adapted Black preaching in verse form, publishing *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* in 1927. Stepping away from poetry and song, Johnson chronicled the history of African American life in New York City in his 1930 book *Black Manhattan*.

After retiring from the NAACP in 1930, Johnson joined the faculty of Fisk University as the Adam K. Spence Professor of Creative Writing. Commenting on his decision to go to Fisk, Johnson said, "I feel that on this favorable ground I shall be able to help effectively in developing additional racial strength and fitness in shaping fresh forces against

bigotry and racial wrong." Students often met in the Johnson home for spirited discussions of literature and Blacks role in America.

James Weldon Johnson's life ended on June 28, 1938, at the age of sixty-seven, when he was killed in an automobile accident in Wiscasset, Maine. Fifty years after his death, on February 2, 1988, the U.S. Postal Service released a commemorative stamp honoring the songwriter, poet, novelist, journalist, critic, autobiographer, lawyer, diplomat, and civil rights activist, and educator. The first day of issue ceremonies were held at Fisk University, where Johnson had taught creative literature. In 1991, the Tennessee Historical Commission approved the placement of the James Weldon Johnson Home historical marker on the campus of Fisk University. Fisk University restored the James Weldon Johnson Home in 2004.

Linda T. Wynn

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