

James Weldon Johnson

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Encyclopedia

James Weldon Johnson was an [American](#) author, politician, diplomat, critic, journalist, poet, anthologist, educator, lawyer, songwriter, and early [civil rights](#) activist. Johnson is remembered best for his leadership within the NAACP, as well as for his writing, which includes novels, poems, and collections of folklore. He was also one of the first African-American professors at [New York University](#). Later in life he was a professor of creative literature and writing at [Fisk University](#).

Life

Johnson was born in [Jacksonville, Florida](#), the son of Helen Louise Dillet and James Johnson. His brother was the composer [J. Rosamond Johnson](#). Johnson was first educated by his mother (a musician and a public school teacher—the first female, black teacher in Florida at a grammar school) and then at [Edwin M. Stanton School](#). His mother imparted to him her considerable love and knowledge of English literature and the European tradition in music. At the age of 16 he enrolled at Atlanta University, from which he graduated in 1894. In addition to his bachelor's degree, he also completed some graduate coursework there. The achievement of his father, headwaiter at the St. James Hotel, a luxury establishment built when Jacksonville was one of Florida's first winter havens, gave young James the wherewithal and the self-confidence to pursue a professional career. Molded by the classical education for which Atlanta University was best known, Johnson regarded his academic training as a trust given him in the expectation that he would dedicate his resources to black people. Johnson was also a prominent member of [Phi Beta Sigma](#) fraternity

He served in several public capacities over the next 35 years, working in education, the diplomatic corps, civil rights activism, literature, poetry, and music. In 1904 Johnson went on [Theodore Roosevelt's](#) presidential Campaign. Theodore Roosevelt appointed Johnson as U.S. consul at Puerto Cabello, [Venezuela](#) from 1906–1908 and then [Nicaragua](#) from 1909–1913.

In 1910, Johnson married Grace Nail while he was a United States Consul in Nicaragua. They had met several years earlier in New York when Johnson was working as a songwriter. A cultured and well-educated New Yorker, Grace Nail Johnson became an accomplished artist in pastels and collaborated with her husband on a screenwriting project.

Education and law

In the summer of 1891 the Atlanta University freshman had gone to a rural district in Georgia to instruct the children of former slaves. "In all of my experience there has been no period so brief that has meant so much in my education for life as the three months I spent in the backwoods of Georgia," Johnson wrote. "I was

thrown for the first time on my own resources and abilities." James Weldon Johnson graduated from Atlanta University in 1894. He would later receive an honorary Master's degree in 1904. After graduation he returned to Stanton, a school for African American students in Jacksonville, until 1906, where, at the young age of 23, he became principal. As principal Johnson found himself the head of the largest public school in Jacksonville regardless of race. For his work Johnson received a paycheck less than half of what was offered to a white colleague possessing a comparable position. Johnson improved education by adding the ninth and tenth grades. Algebra, English composition, physical geography and bookkeeping were a part of the added ninth grade course. The tenth grade course consisted of geometry, English literature, elementary physics, history and Spanish. Johnson later resigned from his position as principal.

In 1897, Johnson was the first African American admitted to the Florida Bar Exam since Reconstruction. He was also the first black in Duval County to seek admission to the state bar. In order to receive entry Johnson underwent a two-hour examination before three attorneys and a judge. He later recalled that one of the examiners, not wanting to see a black man admitted, left the room.

In December 1930, Johnson resigned from the leadership of the NAACP to accept the Spence Chair of Creative Literature at Fisk University in Nashville, where he lectured not only on literature but also on a wide range of issues to do with the life and civil rights of black Americans. The position had been especially created for him, largely out of recognition of his achievements as a poet, editor, and critic during the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. He held this position until his death in an automobile accident in 1938.

Music

In 1901, Johnson moved to New York City with his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson to work in musical theater. Along with his brother, he produced such hits as "Tell Me, Dusky Maiden" and "Nobody's Looking but the Owl and the Moon". Johnson composed the lyrics of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," originally written for a celebration of Lincoln's birthday at Stanton School. This song would later become to be known and adopted as such by the NAACP as the *Negro National Anthem*. After successes with their songwriting and music the brothers worked Broadway and collaborated with producer and director Bob Cole. Johnson also composed the opera *Tolosa* with his brother J. Rosamond Johnson which satirizes the U.S. annexation of the Pacific islands. Enjoying unusual success as a songwriter for Broadway shows, Johnson moved easily in the upper echelons of African American society in Brooklyn, New York where he met his future wife, Heather McKee. Heather was a very poor woman who lived in Naples, but James Weldon Johnson loved her no matter what. But, after a few years of marriage, they divorced due to the dating of Heather. Johnson figured out that Heather had been dating three other men while they had been married for four years. After hearing this he immediately went to court and declared a divorce with Heather McKee.



Diplomacy

In 1906 Johnson was consul of Puerto Cabello, Venezuela. In 1909, he transferred to Corinto, Nicaragua. During his stay at Corinto a rebellion occurred against President Adolfo Diaz. Johnson proved himself an effective diplomat under times of strain. During his work in the foreign service, Johnson became a published poet, with work printed in The Century Magazine and in *The Independent*.

Literature and anthology

During his six-year stay in Hispanic America he completed his most famous book The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man which was published anonymously in 1912. It was only during 1927 that Johnson admitted his authorship "stressing that it was not a work of autobiography but mostly fictional. Other works include *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925), *Black Manhattan* (1930), his exploration of the contribution of African-Americans to the culture of New York, and *Negro Americans, What Now?* (1934), a book advocating civil rights for African Americans. Johnson was also an anthologist. His anthologies concerned African-American themes and were part of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. He also wrote the melody for the song Dem Bones.

Poetry

In 1922, he edited *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, which the Academy of American Poets calls "a major contribution to the history of African-American literature." One of the works for which he is best remembered today, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, was published in 1927 and celebrates the tradition of the folk preacher. In 1917, Johnson published *50 Years and Other Poems*.

Activism

While attending Atlanta University Johnson became known as an influential campus speaker. He won the Quiz Club Contest in English Composition and Oratory in 1892. The contest topic was "The Best Methods of Removing the Disabilities of Caste from the Negro". In addition, Johnson founded the newspaper the *Daily American* and in 1895 and became its editor. The newspaper concerned both political and racial topics. It was terminated a year later due to financial difficulty. These early endeavors were the start of what would prove to be a long period of activism.

Johnson became further involved with political activism during 1904 when he accepted a position as the treasurer of the Colored Republican Club started by [Charles W. Anderson](#). A year later he became the president of the club. His duties as president included organizing political rallies. During 1914 Johnson became editor of the editorial page of the *New York Age*, an influential African American weekly newspaper that had supported [Booker T. Washington](#) in his propaganda struggle with fellow African American W. E. B. Du Bois during the early twentieth century. Johnson's writing for the *Age* displayed the political gift that soon made him famous.

Employed from 1916 by the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People \(NAACP\)](#) as a field secretary, he built and revived local chapters of that organization. Opposing race riots in northern cities and the lynchings that pervaded the South during and immediately after the end of [World War I](#), Johnson engaged the NAACP in mass demonstrations, such as a silent protest parade of more than ten thousand African Americans down New York City's Fifth Avenue on July 28, 1917. In 1919, he coined the term "[Red Summer](#)" and organized peaceful protests against the racial violence of that year.

In 1920 Johnson was elected to manage the NAACP, the first African American to hold this position. While serving the NAACP from 1914 through 1930 Johnson started as an organizer and eventually became the first black male secretary in the organization's history. In 1920, he was sent by the NAACP to investigate conditions in [Haiti](#), which had been occupied by U.S. Marines since 1915. Johnson published a series of articles in *The Nation*, in which he described the American occupation as being brutal and offered suggestions for the economic and social development of Haiti. These articles were reprinted under the title *Self-Determining Haiti*. Throughout the 1920s he was one of the major inspirations and promoters of the [Harlem Renaissance](#) trying to refute condescending white criticism and helping young black authors to get published. While serving in the NAACP Johnson was involved in sparking the drive behind the [Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill](#) of 1921.

Shortly before his death, Johnson supported efforts by [Ignatz Waghalter](#), a Polish-Jewish composer who had escaped the Nazis, to establish a classical orchestra of African-American musicians. According to musical historian James Nathan Jones, the formation of the "American Negro Orchestra" represented for Johnson "the fulfillment of a dream he had for thirty years."

James Weldon Johnson died during 1938 while vacationing in Wiscasset, Maine, when the car he was driving was hit by a train. His funeral in [Harlem](#) was attended by more than 2000 people.

Awards, honors, and legacy

- James Weldon Johnson building is named in his honor at [Coppin State University](#).
- James Weldon Johnson Middle School is named in his honor.
- On February 2, 1988, the [United States Postal Service](#) issued a 22 cent postage stamp in his honor.
- In 2002, scholar [Molefi Kete Asante](#) listed James Weldon Johnson on his list of [100 Greatest African](#)

Americans.

- Springarn Medal from NAACP, 1925 for outstanding achievement by an American Negro.
- Harmon Gold Award for *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*.
- Julius Rosenwald Fund Grant, 1929.
- W. E. B. Du Bois Prize for Negro Literature, 1933, named first incumbent of Spence Chair of Creative Literature at Fisk University.
- Honorary Master's degree from Atlanta University.
- Honorary doctorates from Talladega College and Howard University.

Veneration

Johnson is honored with a feast day on the liturgical calendar of the Episcopal Church (USA) on June 25.

Poetry collections

- *To a Friend* (1892)
- *A Brand* (1893)
- *The Color Sergeant* (1898)
- *Lift Every Voice and Sing* (1899)
- *Sense You Went Away* (1900)
- *The Black Mammy* (1900)
- *O Black and Unknown Bards* (1908)
- *Brothers* (1916)
- *Fifty Years and Other Poems* (1917)
- *My City* (1923)
- *Go Down, Death* (1926)
- *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927)
- *Saint Peter Relates an Incident* (1935)
- *The Glory of the Day was in Her Face*
- *Selected Poems* (1936)

Other works and collections

- *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912/1927)
- *Self-Determining Haiti*
- *The Book of American Negro Poetry* Harcourt, Brace, and Company
- *Second Book of Negro Spirituals*
- *Black Manhattan*
- *Negro Americans, What Now?*
- *Along This Way*
- *The Selected Writings of James Weldon Johnson*

Other Sources

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See also

- [African American musical theater](#)
- [Red Summer of 1919](#)

External links

- [Images and archive at the Smithsonian Institute.](#)
- [James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection \(Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library\)](#)
- [Profile and Images at the James Weldon Johnson Institute, Emory.](#) [Archives at Emory](#)
- [Profile, images, texts At University of South Carolina.](#) [University Libraries rare books and special collections.](#)
- [Grace and James Weldon Johnson Website](#)
- [Profile at Modern American Poets](#)
- [Profile and texts at Poets.org](#)
- [Profile at Poetry Foundation](#)

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James Weldon Johnson, (born June 17, 1871, Jacksonville, Fla., U.S.â€”died June 26, 1938, Wiscasset, Maine), poet, diplomat, and anthologist of black culture. Trained in music and other subjects by his mother, a schoolteacher, Johnson graduated from Atlanta University with A.B. (1894) and M.A. (1904) degrees and later studied at Columbia University.Â Dust jacket by the African American artist Aaron Douglas for James Weldon Johnson's God's Trombones (1927), a collection of black dialect sermons.

James Weldon Johnson (June 17, 1871 – June 26, 1938) was an American author and civil rights activist. He was married to civil rights activist Grace Nail Johnson. Johnson was a leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), where he started working in 1917. In 1920, he was the first African American to be chosen as executive secretary of the organization, effectively the operating officer. He served in that position from 1920 to 1930. Johnson established his Emory's James Weldon Johnson Institute for the Study of Race and Difference is an intellectual project that seeks to capture and reflect the many artistic, scholastic, and humanitarian achievements of Johnson by supporting research that focuses upon the ongoing quest for universal civil and human rights. Johnson Institute Founding Director Rudolph Byrd on the life and legacy of James Weldon Johnson.