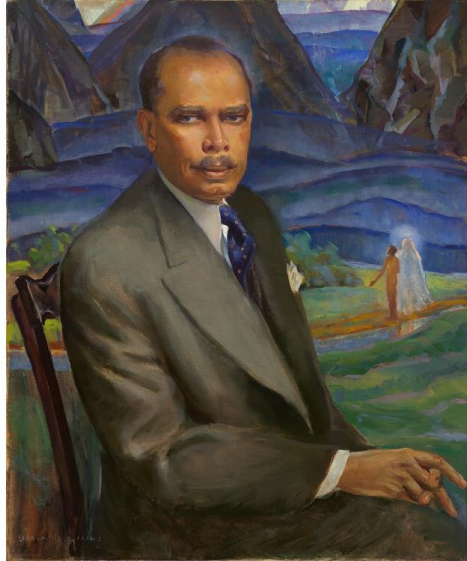


**“The Harlem Renaissance: Rebirth of African-American Arts”
Westbury Arts Remembers
James Weldon Johnson
1871-1938**

**Poet, Novelist, Historian, Diplomat, Lawyer, Civil Rights Leader, Editor, Educator, and
Songwriter**

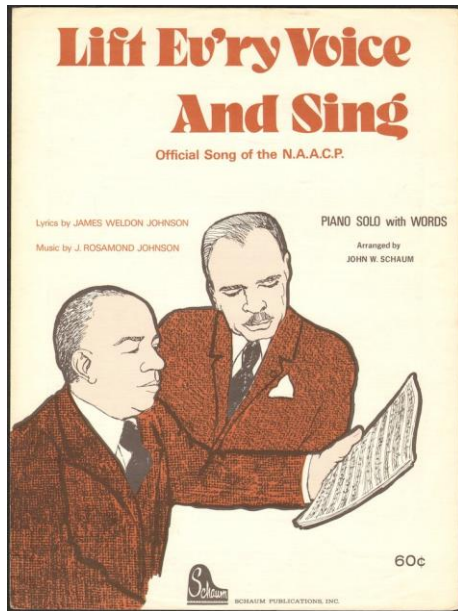


Portrait of James Weldon Johnson by Laura Wheeler Waring
[National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of the Harmon Foundation](#)

James Welton Johnson was truly a “renaissance man,” a person of broad talents and ability, who lived a life that was defined by his accomplishments.

Born in Jacksonville, Florida in 1871, Johnson grew up in a middle-class home. His father worked as a headwaiter in a hotel and his mother was a teacher at Jacksonville’s segregated Stanton School, where he also attended. James grew up in cultured and economically secure surroundings that were unusual among Southern Black families at the time. Under his mother’s guidance he developed a love of reading, poetry, and music. Johnson attended and graduated from Atlanta University in 1894 with a bachelor of arts (BA) degree. He returned to the Stanton School as its Principal and at the same time began studying law. In 1898 he became the first African American lawyer in the state of Florida. Working both as a principal and lawyer, he found time to write poetry and songs.

Johnson, collaborated with his brother, John Rosamond Johnson, in setting one of his poems to music. The resulting song, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” is known today as [“Black National Anthem.”](#) Explaining how the song took on a life of its own, he wrote:



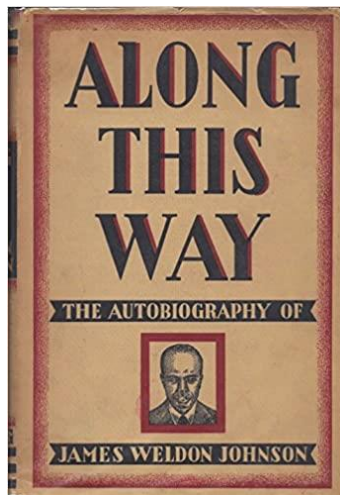
“A group of young men in Jacksonville, Florida, arranged to celebrate Lincoln’s birthday in 1900. My brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, and I decided to write a song to be sung at the exercises. I wrote the words, and he wrote the music. Shortly afterwards my brother and I moved away from Jacksonville to New York, and the song passed out of our minds. But the school children of Jacksonville kept singing it; they went off to other schools and sang it; they became teachers and taught it to other children. Within twenty years it was being sung over the South and in some other parts of the country. Today the song, popularly known as the Negro National Hymn, is quite generally used. The lines of this song repay me in an elation, almost of exquisite anguish, whenever I hear them sung by Negro children.”

For more than a hundred years, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” has held a key place in American history. It has been said that “the song is a history lesson, a rallying cry, a pledge of unity, and as people gather to fight for equality and justice, it is an ever-present refrain.” The song includes the following lines:

“Lift every voice and sing,
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the list’ning skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

In 1901, the Johnson brothers moved to New York City to write songs for Broadway musicals and opera. Together they achieved success with the composition of around two hundred songs. During this time, Johnson also studied creative literature formally for three years at Columbia University.

While living in New York, Johnson also became involved in politics. His diplomatic career began in 1906, when President Theodore Roosevelt appointed him as the first African American United States consul to Venezuela and in 1909, he was promoted to serve as consul in Nicaragua. In addition to his service as consul Johnson published a work of fiction, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). Published anonymously in 1912, the novel attracted little attention until it was reissued under Johnson's own name more than a ten years later. The book tended to draw more comment from a sociological perspective rather than as a work of fiction. Readers believed it to be a true autobiography. Johnson eventually authored his real-life story, *Along This Way*, to end the confusion.



Leaving government service in 1916, Johnson was hired by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Rising quickly through the leadership ranks, he became the first African American to serve as field secretary and later as executive secretary. During his time with the NAACP, Johnson succeeded in significantly raising the organization's visibility and membership, as well as bringing attention to racism, lynching, and segregation. Retiring from his position with the NAACP in 1930, Johnson accepted a creative writing teaching position at Fisk University. In 1934 he accepted an appointment as Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at New York University, thus becoming the NYU's first African American faculty member.

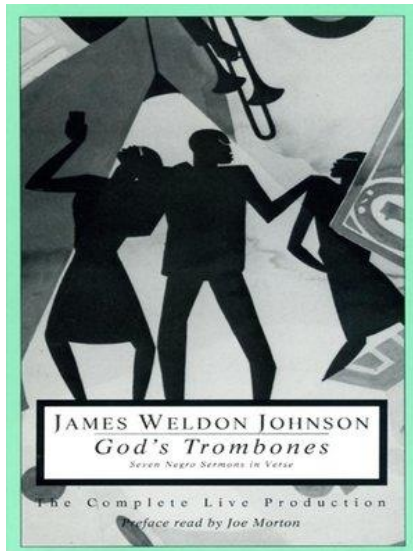
Johnson's efforts to preserve and win recognition for Black cultural traditions contributed to the spirit of racial pride and self-confidence that marked the efflorescence of Black music, art, and literature in the 1920s known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Johnson believed that it was important for Black Americans to produce great literature and art. By doing so, Johnson held that blacks could show their intellectual equality and advance their placement in America.

Throughout Johnson's life, he was able to continue writing. He wrote several notable works before and during the Harlem Renaissance. He brought a high standard of artistry and realism to Black literature in such works as *God's Trombones* (1927), *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), *Negro Americans, What Now?* (1934), *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (1933), and *Black Manhattan* (1930). His pioneering studies of Black poetry, music, and theater in the 1920s introduced many white Americans to the rich African American creative spirit, hitherto known through the distortions of the minstrel show and dialect poetry.



Sadly, Johnson died tragically at the age of 67, in June 1938, after the car he was riding in was struck by a train at an unguarded rail crossing in Wiscasset, Maine. The poet and civil rights leader was widely eulogized and more than 2,000 mourners attended his Harlem funeral. Known throughout his career as a generous and invariably courteous man, Johnson once summed up his personal credo as a Black American in a pamphlet published by the NAACP:



“I will not allow one prejudiced person or one million or one hundred million to blight my life. I will not let prejudice or any of its attendant humiliations and injustices bear me down to spiritual defeat. My inner life is mine, and I shall defend and maintain its integrity against all the powers of hell.” Johnson was buried in Brooklyn's Greenwood Cemetery dressed in his favorite lounging robe and holding a copy of *God's Trombones* in his hand.

Compiled by Stanley Turetsky

To Learn More

1. Poetry Foundation, “Lift Every Voice and Sing”
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46549/lift-every-voice-and-sing>
2. Poetry Foundation, “James Waldon Johnson”
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/james-weldon-johnson>

3. NAACP Website, "NAACP History: JAMES WELDON JOHNSON"
<https://www.naacp.org/naacp-history-james-weldon-johnson/>
 4. Emory University, "About James Weldon Johnson"
<http://jamesweldonjohnson.emory.edu/home/about/index.html>
 5. Archives at Yale "James Weldon Johnson and Grace Nail Johnson papers"
<https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/resources/978>
 6. Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, "James Weldon and Grace Nail Johnson Papers"
<https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/article/james-weldon-and-grace-nail-johnson-papers>
 7. The Buckley School, "Poetry to Read Aloud: James Weldon Johnson"
<https://buckleyschool.com/magazine/articles/poetry-to-read-aloud-james-weldon-johnson/>
- Wikipedia, "James Weldon Johnson Bibliography"
8. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Weldon_Johnson#Bibliography