

## PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

### James Weldon Johnson

artist, lawyer, activist

*“It’s no disgrace to be black, but it’s often very inconvenient.”*

Page | 1



#### Background Information

Born: June 17, 1871

Death: June 26, 1938

James was born in Jacksonville, Florida. His father was a waiter and his mother was a schoolteacher in a segregated school, where James attended and got his education. His mother encouraged him to pursue education, reading, and music. He attended college at Atlanta University and graduated college with a Bachelor’s Degree in 1894. After graduating he became the principal of his former school and decided to become a lawyer.<sup>1</sup>

#### Johnson’s Resistance

In 1898, Johnson became the first Black person to pass the bar exam in Florida, allowing him to be a lawyer.<sup>2</sup> While working as a lawyer, Johnson also wrote poetry and songs. In 1901, he and his brother moved to New York and began writing over 200 songs for Broadway. His most well-known song is “Lift Every Voice and Sing”, which became the anthem of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Johnson also worked as a secretary for the NAACP. He expanded membership and opened new branches across the country. He worked tirelessly to raise awareness against lynching, racism, and segregation.

While in New York, Johnson was also involved in politics. He served as a consul to Venezuela and Nicaragua under President Teddy Roosevelt. Johnson was also an author and published numerous novels including his famous “The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man”.<sup>3</sup>

#### Achievements

“Lift Every Voice and Sing” continues to serve as a culturally relevant commemorative staple during Black History Month. Johnson played a prominent role in the Harlem Renaissance as well. Johnson received the Spingarn Medal from the NAACP for outstanding achievement.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> NAACP | NAACP History: James Weldon Johnson. (2018, July 13). NAACP. <https://www.naacp.org/naacp-history-james-weldon-johnson/>

<sup>2</sup> About James Weldon Johnson. (n.d.). Emory University. Retrieved October 20, 2020, from <http://jamesweldonjohnson.emory.edu/home/about/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> Biography.com Editors. (2020, September 17). James Weldon Johnson. Biography.Com. <https://www.biography.com/writer/james-weldon-johnson>

<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia contributors. (2020, October 3). James Weldon Johnson. Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Weldon\\_Johnson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Weldon_Johnson)

## Essential Questions

1. Why is Johnson someone to be recognized? What talents or skills did he possess that made him stand out?
2. How did Johnson improve life for African Americans? What actions did he take to resist discrimination?
3. What are two adjectives you would use to describe Johnson? How can you apply these adjectives to your own life?
4. **“It’s no disgrace to be black, but it’s often very inconvenient.”**
  - a. What do you think he meant by this?
  - b. Is it inconvenient to be Black in today’s society?
    - i. Why or Why not?