James Weldon Johnson, 1871-1938

ARCHIVED ONLINE EXHIBIT

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Archived Online Exhibit ................................................................. 1
introduction .................................................................................. 2
Biography ....................................................................................... 3
Music ............................................................................................... 6
Poetry & Fiction ............................................................................. 8
Nonfiction ..................................................................................... 10
Additional Resources .................................................................. 13
Recently, the Thomas Cooper Library has formed a collection of books and manuscripts by James Weldon Johnson, African-American poet and statesman. In 1997 the library received the personal collection of the distinguished story-teller and librarian Augusta Baker. In 1939, as children's librarian of the 135th Street (Harlem) Branch of the New York Public Library, Baker established the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection, showcasing books that portrayed black children in positive ways. Included in Baker's own collection were materials relating to her association with Johnson. One special treasure was a small group of the poet's manuscripts. These four holograph poems were the seeds of the new James Weldon Johnson Collection at the Cooper Library.
1.1.1 Biography

Early Years
Born James William Johnson in Jacksonville, Florida, on 17 June 1871 — he changed his middle name to Weldon in 1913 — the future teacher, poet, songwriter, and civil rights activist was the son of a headwaiter and the first female black public school teacher in Florida, both of whom had roots in Nassau, Bahamas. The second of three children, Johnson's interests in reading and music were encouraged by his parents. After graduating from the school where his mother taught, Johnson spent time with relatives in Nassau and in New York before continuing with his education.

College
While attending Atlanta University, from which he earned his A.B. in 1894, Johnson taught for two summers in rural Hampton, Georgia. There he experienced life among poor African Americans, from which he had been largely sheltered during his middle-class upbringing in Jacksonville. During the summer before his senior year he attended the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where, on "Colored People's Day," he listened to a speech by Frederick Douglass and heard poems read by Paul Laurence Dunbar, with whom he soon became friends.

Educator and Songwriter
After graduating from Atlanta University, Johnson became the principal of the Jacksonville school where his mother had taught, improving education there by adding ninth and tenth grades. In 1895 he founded a newspaper, the Daily American, designed to educate Jacksonville's adult black community, but problems with finances forced it to shut down after only eight months. While still serving as a public school principal, Johnson studied law and became the first African American to pass the bar exam in Florida.
When Johnson's younger brother, John Rosamond, graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music in 1897, the two began collaborating on a musical theater. Though there attempts to get their comic opera "Tolosa" produced in New York in 1899 were unsuccessful, Johnson's experiences there excited his creative energies. He soon began writing lyrics, for which his brother composed music, including "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which subsequently came to be known as the "Negro National Anthem." The Johnson brothers soon teamed up with Bob Cole to write songs. In 1902, Johnson resigned his post as principal in Jacksonville, and the two brothers moved to New York, where their partnership with Cole proved very successful.

**Diplomat and Poet**

Johnson, though, became dissatisfied with the racial stereotypes propagated by popular music and, in 1903, began taking graduate courses at Columbia University to expand his literary horizons. In 1906 he secured a consulsipship at Puerto Cabello, Venezuela, the position allowing him time to write poetry and work on a novel. In 1909 he was transferred to Corinto, Nicaragua, where a year later he married Grace Nail, the daughter of prosperous real estate developer from New York. While still in Nicaragua he finished his novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, which was published anonymously in 1912 in hopes that readers might think it a factual story.

Unable to secure a more desirable diplomatic post, Johnson resigned his consulsipship in 1913 and returned to the U.S. After a year in Jacksonville, he moved back to New York to become an editorial writer for the *New York Age*, in which capacity he was an ardent champion for equal rights. In 1917 he published his first collection of poetry, *Fifty Years and Other Poems*, the title poem having received considerable praise when it had first appeared in the *New York Times*.

**Activist and Anthologist**

In 1916, Joel E. Spingarn offered Johnson the post of field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. An effective organizer, Johnson became general secretary of the NAACP in 1920. Though his duties prevented him from writing as much as he would have liked, Johnson found time to assemble three ground-breaking anthologies: *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925), and *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals* (1926).

Johnson's second collection of poetry, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, appeared in 1927 and marks his last significant creative endeavor. His administrative duties for the NAACP were proving strenuous, and, after taking a leave of absence in 1929, he resigned as general secretary in 1930. During his final years he wrote a history of black life in New York that focuses on
Harlem Renaissance entitled *Black Manhattan* (1930), his truly autobiographical *Along This Way* (1933), and *Negro Americans, What Now?* (1934), a book that argues for integration as the only viable solution to America's racial problems.

Johnson died on 26 June 1938 near his summer home in Wiscasset, Maine, when the car in which he was driving was struck by a train. His funeral in Harlem was attended by more than 2000 people.
James Weldon Johnson & Bob Cole, lyrics
J. Rosamond Johnson, music
**The Old Flag Never Touched the Ground**

James Weldon Johnson, lyrics
Will Marion, music
**If the Sands of the Seas Were Pearls**

As part of "Cole and Johnson Brothers," a collaboration that flourished in the first decade of the twentieth century, James Weldon Johnson wrote the lyrics to over two hundred popular songs. Shown here are two examples of Johnson's sheet music. "The Old Flag Never Touched the Ground" was originally written for the then-popular black-face minstrel shows. Johnson became well known for writing the lyrics to romantic ballads such as "If the Sands of the Seas Were Pearls."

- An exhibit produced by the Library of Congress explains the origins of "The Old Flag Never Touched the Ground".

James Weldon Johnson, lyrics
J. Rosamond Johnson, music
**Lift Every Voice and Sing**
New York: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, [ca. 1920].

**Lift Every Voice and Sing: Quartette for Mixed Voices**
New York: Edward B. Marks Music Company, [ca. 1928].

Perhaps the best known of all the Johnson brothers' collaborations was this stirring hymn, often called the "Negro National Anthem." The Thomas Cooper Library holds two early versions of this song. Around 1920, the NAACP printed a single sheet with the lyrics to both "Lift Every Voice" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." From the Augusta Baker Collection is displayed an early choral version, "respectfully dedicated to Booker T. Washington," the African-American educator.

The text of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" is available online from several sites, including:

- Fellowship of African Studies and Religion
If your browser is equipped with a plugin that plays RealAudio music files, you can listen to "Lift Every Voice and Sing".

The Book of American Negro Spirituals

The Second Book of Negro Spirituals

New York's Harlem during the early years of the twentieth century became a center of African-American art and culture. Performers like Josephine Baker and Bill Robinson and writers like Countee Cullen and Arna Bontemps helped make white America aware of black music, art, and poetry. This Harlem Renaissance awakened interest in the body of black folk music we now know as spirituals. Johnson and his brother Rosamond, who was responsible for the musical arrangements, produced two very successful anthologies of traditional songs in 1925 and 1926. James Weldon Johnson's scholarly and informative introductions to each volume revealed the history and importance of these songs as a significant element in black folk tradition. The first image shows the famous "Gimme Dat Ol'-Time Religion," while the second displays the first page of the song "When I Fall on My Knees (Wid My Face to de Risin' Sun)," this version of which was dedicated to the memory of the Johnson brothers' partner, Bob Cole.
James Weldon Johnson

Four Holograph Poems

"Moods"  "The River"  Johnson wrote poetry throughout his life. Shown here are some of the treasures from the Augusta Baker Collection — four holograph manuscripts by James Weldon Johnson. These manuscripts reveal Johnson's skill as a poet in working with more traditional verse forms. Three of the manuscripts — "Moods," "The River," and "Man" — are fair copies, copied from the originals in the author's own handwriting. The fourth, "The Miser" (also called "Let Down Your Hair"), is in three drafts, each initialed by the author, showing changes in rhymes, vocabulary, and even title.

"Man"  "The Miser"

The accompanying images are provided to give a sense of the visual appearance of the Johnson manuscripts; previously unpublished textual elements remain copyright.

James Weldon Johnson

The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man

Following his resignation from the consular service in September 1913, Johnson decided to become a full-time writer. In that year he published The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, which, despite its misleading title, is a novel concerning a black man who passes for white. Now a classic of African-American literature, the novel offers a vivid portrait of the black experience in early twentieth-century America. In 1927 Knopf reprinted the work as part of its Blue Jade Library series with a glowing introduction by novelist Carl Van Vechten.

James Weldon Johnson

Fifty Years and Other Poems

Johnson's second book was a collection of sixty-five poems, of which ten had previously been published in periodicals. The title poem, "Fifty Years," celebrates the progress in American race relations since the Emancipation Proclamation and was warmly praised when it first appeared in the 1 January 1913 issue of the New York Times. This particular copy, which was purchased for the library by the Thomas Cooper Society, has been inscribed by Johnson.
New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922.

Even while traveling, lecturing, and lobbying, Johnson made time to pursue his literary interests. In 1922 he produced the first edition of *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, an anthology of contemporary African-American verse that included such writers as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Claud McKay, and W. E. B. Du Bois. (The second edition of the collection, published in 1931, added nine more poets, including Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes.) In the preface, Johnson stated one of his best-known beliefs: "the final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced." By presenting the literary achievements of African Americans, Johnson hoped to change the perceptions of white America about the inferiority of his race.

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**James Weldon Johnson**

**God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse**

As a poet, Johnson began to experiment with the free verse form, producing what may be his best-known work, *God's Trombones*. Though a committed agnostic, Johnson used the work to pay tribute to the black preachers he remembered from his childhood. Each poem presents in lyrical but colloquial language a version of a classic sermon, such as "The Prodigal Son" or "Noah Built an Ark." Johnson rejected the use of broad Negro dialect as comic and derogatory and revealed the old-time black preacher as a folk figure of dignity and eloquence.

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**James Weldon Johnson**

**Saint Peter Relates an Incident**

This collection reprints Johnson's bitter and satirical poem "Saint Peter Relates an Incident of the Resurrection Day," first published in 1930. In this poem, Saint Peter tells the assembled heavenly host about the resurrection of the Unknown Soldier, who horrifies the G.A.R., the D.A.R., Confederate veterans, and the Ku Klux Klan by being black. Johnson wrote the poem after learning that black and white gold-star mothers would not be allowed to travel on the same ship taking them to France to visit the graves of their sons slain in the Great War. Most of the other poems were selected from *Fifty Years and Other Poems*, originally published in 1917.
Nonfiction

James Weldon Johnson
Self-Determining Haiti
[New York: The Nation, 1920.]

In 1916, after serving as a United States Consul in Venezuela and Nicaragua, Johnson began a new career, this time as field secretary for the NAACP. During his fourteen years with the organization, Johnson was an active speaker, lobbyist, and investigator. 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 revealed the brutality of the American occupation and offered suggestions for the economic and social development of the island country. These articles were reprinted under the title *Self-Determining Haiti*.

James Weldon Johnson
The Larger Success
[Hampton, VA, 1923?]

Throughout his career with the NAACP, Johnson was a popular public speaker. Displayed here is a rare offprint of one of Johnson's speeches, the 1923 commencement address at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University). In this speech, he reminded the graduates of the accomplishments of African Americans and exhorted them to earn a place in American democracy.

James Weldon Johnson
Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist

In 1928 Johnson published an article in *Harper's* attempting to end the common misconception among white Americans that "the Negro reached America intellectually, culturally, and morally empty, and that he is here to be filled. . . ." By describing the achievements of African Americans like Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Claude McKay, Paul Robeson, and Marian Anderson, Johnson showed that the Negro is "an active and important force in American life; that he is a creator as well as a creature; that he has given as well as received, that he is the potential giver of larger and richer contributions."
James Weldon Johnson
**Black Manhattan**

Awarded a Rosenwald Fellowship, Johnson tried his hand at history and produced *Black Manhattan*, a lively book about the Negro in New York emphasizing the artistic and literary accomplishments of African Americans. The final chapter of this informal history described Harlem, home to over 200,000 blacks and center of what was then called the Negro Renaissance, as a laboratory experiment in racial equality.

James Weldon Johnson
**Along This Way**

After a successful career with the NAACP, Johnson returned to teaching, joining the faculty of Fisk University in Nashville as professor of creative literature. While at Fisk, he produced his autobiography, *Along This Way*, in which he concluded that the Negro race must continue to advance because "if the Negro is made to fail, America fails with him," Johnson also denied that African Americans would embrace communism to solve the problems of prejudice and discrimination, as many whites feared. In his mind, blacks were too sensible to adopt a creed that would separate them even more from mainstream America.

James Weldon Johnson
**Negro Americans, What Now?**

A year after the publication of the story of his life, Johnson published *Negro Americans, What Now?*, a series of his lectures addressed especially to young blacks, in which he outlines possible responses to the problem of racism. Rejecting colonization, revolution, and isolation, Johnson declared that "the most logical, the most feasible, and the most worthwhile choice for us is to follow the course that leads to our becoming an integral part of the nation, with the same rights and guarantees that are accorded to other citizens, and on the same terms." This collection was Johnson's last book.

Grace Nail Johnson
**Letter to Augusta Baker, 22 May 1971**

Johnson married Grace Nail on 1910 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. Shown here is a letter from Mrs. Johnson to Augusta Baker, a long-time friend.

- The University of South Carolina’s Thomas Cooper Library houses the Augusta Baker Collection of African-American Children’s Literature and Folklore.
1.1.1.1  **Biography & History**

- African American Literature Book Club  
  Aalb.Com offers information on books by or about Johnson currently in print as well as additional information about the author. http://aalbc.com/jamesw.htm

- Harlem, 1900-1940  
  This exhibition by the University of Michigan includes a page on Johnson that offers useful information on the historical and cultural contexts in which he wrote. http://www.si.umich.edu/CHICO/Harlem/text/jwjohnson.html

- James Weldon Johnson  
  The Smithsonian Institute's National Portrait Gallery provides information about Johnson as well as Laura Wheeler Warning's 1943 oil on canvas painting of the author. http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/harmon/johnharm.htm

- Jazz Roots  
  Jass.com provides information about Cole & Johnson Brothers, the partnership of James Weldon Johnson with his brother John Rosamond Johnson and Bob Cole that would prove to be one of the most influential forces in early twentieth-century jazz. http://www.jass.com/c&j.html

- Survey Graphic (March 1925)  
  The Electronic Text Center at the University of Virginia presents the March 1925 issue of Survey Graphic. This monthly illustrated number of one of the early twentieth century's foremost journals of social work was edited by Alain Locke, who later later published an expanded form of this magazine as the *New Negro* anthology. The issue contains Johnson's essay "The Making of Harlem." http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/harlem/index.html

1.1.1.2  **Texts**

- The American Academy of Poets  
  This well designed exhibit includes a biography of Johnson; texts of "Go Down, Death," "Listen, Lord: A Prayer," and "Lift Every Voice and Sing"; and a RealAudio recording of Arna Bontemps reading "The Creation." [http://www.poets.org/lit/poet/jwjohfst.htm]

- The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man  
  Eric Eldred of Eldritch Press has made Johnson's only novel available online. [http://eldred.ne.mediaone.net/jwj/auto.htm]

- Fifty Years & Other Poems  
  The Humanities Text Initiative American Verse Collection developed by the University of Michigan provides the entire text of Johnson's first and arguably most important collection of poetry. [http://www.hti.umich.edu/bin/amv-idx.pl?type=header&id=JohnJFifty]

- Harlem Renaissance  
  Developed by Jill Diesman of Northern Kentucky University, this site provides the text of seven Johnson poems: "O Black and Unknown Bards," "Fifty Years, 1863-

[http://www.nku.edu/~diesmanj/johnson.html]

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**Educational Materials**

- **Exploring Poetry**
  An online sample of the CD-ROM from Gale Research, this site includes a biography of Johnson and significant information about "The Creation," including the text of the poem, an overview of its origins, an examination of its style and structure, sources for further research, and suggestions for classroom discussion topics.  

- **The Heath Anthology of American Literature**
  Contributing editor Arthenia J. Bates Millican offers strategies for teaching Johnson's poetry in the classroom, including analysis of themes, style, and audience.

- **A Middle School Approach to Black Literature**
  Ivory Erkerd's curriculum unit for the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute provides middle school teachers with lesson plans and additional information on Johnson, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and Maya Angelou.

- **PAL: Perspectives in American Literature**
  A research and reference guide by Paul P. Reuben, chapter 9 includes a section on Johnson that offers the text of "The Creation," comprehensive primary and secondary bibliographies, and a very useful collection of study questions.