



# Caribbean-American Political Action Committee

Advancing the political agenda of Caribbean Americans

C-PAC Celebrates Black History Month and celebrate the contributions of Caribbean nationals to the United States. Unlike most new immigrant groups, Americans of Caribbean heritage have been in this country since the enslavement of black people. Read about James Weldon Johnson below.

## James Weldon Johnson



James Weldon Johnson, author of the Negro National Anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” was born in Jacksonville, Florida on June 17, 1871. His mother, Helen Louise Dillet, was a native of Nassau, Bahamas. Helen’s great-grandmother, Hester Argo, had escaped from Haiti in 1802 during that country’s revolution., with her, she brought her three young children, including Stephen Dillet, James' grandfather. In 1833, Stephen Dillet became the first black person to win election to the Bahamian Legislature. James Johnson - James Weldon Johnson’s father - was a freeborn native of Virginia. He was, for many years, the headwaiter at the St. James Hotel, a luxury resort in Jacksonville.

As young boys, both James and his brother, John, were educated by their mother, a public-school teacher and musician. James entered Atlanta University, a historically black college at sixteen, and graduated in 1894. During his freshman year, he spent three months teaching the descendants of former slaves in a rural district of Georgia. It was a life transforming experience. While at university, he also became a member of Phi Beta Sigma fraternity. In 1897, he became the first African American since Reconstruction allowed to take the Florida Bar Exam.

James and his brother, John, later moved to New York city where they achieved some success as songwriters on Broadway in the early nineteen hundreds. But for the next forty years, Johnson was primarily engaged in public service as an educator and as a civil rights activist. He also became an established poet, novelist and anthologist. As a public servant, he served the US Government, under President Theodore Roosevelt, as the United States Consul to Venezuela from 1906 to 1908 and to Nicaragua from 1909 to 1913.

In 1910, James married Grace Neil, a well-educated, cultured New Yorker. She would collaborate with him as a screenwriter, and they became leading figures in the Harlem Renaissance of the nineteen-twenties. James became a field secretary of the NAACP in 1917, and the first executive secretary in 1920. Under his leadership, the organization's membership increased, and numerous new chapters were organized in the American South. During this period, Haiti was under US occupation. In 1920, Johnson wrote about the "economic corruption, forced labor, press censorship, racial segregation, and wanton violence" introduced to Haiti by the United States. The resulting outcry from numerous African Americans calling for the removal of US troops led to the end of the occupation in 1934.

James Weldon Johnson died in 1938 in a car accident, while vacationing in Wiscasset, Maine. More than two thousand people attended his funeral in Harlem. In 1900, he and his brother John, had written "Lift Every Voice and Sing." The hymn was later adopted by the NAACP as the Negro National Anthem. It is a fitting tribute to a great Caribbean American.

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**The Caribbean-American Political Action Committee**

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