# James Weldon Johnson

**Author, Lawyer, Diplomat**

**James Weldon Johnson** was born in Jacksonville, Florida, on June 17, 1871. He went to college at Atlanta University and Columbia University. Johnson would attain success in several different career areas during his lifetime.

In 1898, he became the first African American lawyer admitted to the Florida bar. He continued to practice law in Florida until 1902, when he moved to New York City with his brother.

Johnson and his brother John, a composer, became successful songwriters. Together they wrote "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which became known as the "Black national anthem." They continued to write together, ultimately authoring more than two hundred songs as well as a Broadway musical.

Johnson also became a diplomat. He was the U.S. consul in Venezuela from 1906 to 1909 and in Nicaragua from 1909 to 1912. In addition, he was active in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), serving as field secretary from 1916 to 1920 and as executive secretary from 1920 to 1930.

In 1930, Johnson accepted a position as a professor of creative literature at Tennessee's Fisk University. He had become an accomplished writer in addition to his other achievements. He wrote poetry, novels, studies of African American life, and an autobiography. Perhaps his most famous novel was *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, which explored the status of race relations in the United States through the eyes of its narrator, who was struggling with his own racial identity.

On June 26, 1938, Johnson died as a result of injuries received in a car accident. In recognition of Johnson's many contributions to society, the U.S. Postal Service issued a stamp in his honor in 1988.

## Activities

1. Read the words to the song "Lift Every Voice and Sing" and analyze the meaning of the words. Why do you think the song has been called the "Black national anthem"?

2. James Weldon Johnson was part of the Harlem Renaissance. Research the movement and prepare a short report for the class.