

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME

HISTORIC

James Weldon Johnson Residence

AND/OR COMMON

James Weldon Johnson Residence

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

187 West 135th Street

__ NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

New York

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

19

__ VICINITY OF

STATE

New York

CODE

36

COUNTY

New York

CODE

061

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

- DISTRICT
- BUILDING(S)
- STRUCTURE
- SITE
- OBJECT

OWNERSHIP

- PUBLIC
- PRIVATE
- BOTH
- PUBLIC ACQUISITION**
- IN PROCESS
- BEING CONSIDERED

STATUS

- OCCUPIED
- UNOCCUPIED
- WORK IN PROGRESS
- ACCESSIBLE**
- YES: RESTRICTED
- YES: UNRESTRICTED
- NO

PRESENT USE

- AGRICULTURE
- COMMERCIAL
- EDUCATIONAL
- ENTERTAINMENT
- GOVERNMENT
- INDUSTRIAL
- MILITARY
- MUSEUM
- PARK
- PRIVATE RESIDENCE
- RELIGIOUS
- SCIENTIFIC
- TRANSPORTATION
- OTHER Apartment

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

Director, New York City Department of Finance (212) 566-3400

STREET & NUMBER

City Hall, 31 Chambers Street

CITY, TOWN

New York

__ VICINITY OF

STATE

New York

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Registry of Deeds, New York County Courthouse (212) 566-3734

STREET & NUMBER

City Hall, 31 Chambers Street

CITY, TOWN

New York

STATE

New York

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

None Known

DATE

__ FEDERAL __ STATE __ COUNTY __ LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

CITY, TOWN

STATE

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

185 West 135th Street is the first building west of Seventh Avenue on the north side of the street. In this structure James Weldon Johnson resided a little more than 13 years between 1925 and 1938 while heading the NAACP as its National Executive Secretary. There are two separate adjoining entrances, to the five story apartment building, #185 and #187. The building's architectural character is enhanced by it's Romanesque style rusticated stone first floor exterior and entrance porch, which is supported by four marble columns with cushioned capitals and stilted round "Norman" arches in contrast to the overall Italian Renaissance details above the first floor.

Both #185 and #187 and the corner building were, no doubt built at the same time (early twentieth century) by the same builder, since their details, brick and cornice lines are identical. The building is five stories and is similar to the "dumbbell" plan allowing for a side light court and fire escape.

Construction of #185 and #187 is masonry exterior bearing wall, with wood joists and rafters. A masonry fire and bearing wall is constructed between the two buildings. A deep vertical recess can be seen on the front elevation at the location of this wall.

The front elevation above the first floor is red face brick with limestone trim, sills, and lintels. The building has a projecting metal cornice supported by modillions below which continues 4 feet around the west side. Below the cornice is a dentil band frieze beneath which runs a raised plain brick architrave. The west corner of the building has a round bay above the first floor. On each of the upper four floors, there are seven symmetrically located double-hung wood windows. The first window is centered in the round bay of the west end, on the top floor, this window is flanked on either side by plain brick bas-reliefs, which are also between every two windows. A projected limestone cornice extends across the building at the sill of the fifth and fourth floor windows. The windows on the third and second floor have limestone sills and lintels and the openings are trimmed with rusticated brick joints. A slightly projected horizontal stone cornice with plain stone frieze, extends and separates the first floor stone from the brick above. Below this cornice the front exterior finish changes to painted white rusticated limestone with alternate red brick coursing down to the first floor window sill line. The entrance porch is centered in the front elevation with three wood, double-hung windows framed in one bay, equal distance on each side of the porch. Below each bay are basement windows and an areaway with a wrought-iron railing around.

8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD

AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW

<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

Afro-American History

SPECIFIC DATES **James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938)** BUILDER/ARCHITECT **None Known**
Residency (1925-1938)

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

James Weldon Johnson, through his diverse artistic contributions, including literature and music, and his educational, civil and political achievements, became a vanguard pioneer and crusading spokesman for full equality for black Americans and the advancement of democracy for all Americans. Successfully combining humanism with realism, he spoke to both whites and blacks subscribing to his belief that "white America cannot save itself if it prevents us (blacks) from being saved." The saving of each was necessary for the survival of democracy. To this end he championed the fight for blacks while at the same time he waged a battle of educating whites to the fact that the millions of Afro-Americans were not liabilities, but contributors to American civilization. In so doing he never allowed blacks, or whites, to forget that blacks had a proud heritage in the making of America. Moreover, he exemplified this through both his writings and deeds. Perhaps the eleventh stanza of his 15 verse poem for the Preliminary Proclamation of Emancipation of 1862 attests most to the contributions of blacks in the making of America. "This land is ours by right of birth. This land is ours by right of toil. We helped to turn its virgin earth. Our sweat is in its virgin soil."

BIOGRAPHY

James Weldon Johnson was born June 17, 1871 in Jacksonville, Florida to a middle class black family, his father a headwaiter and preacher and his mother a musician and school teacher. He received his early education in the Jacksonville public school system. After graduation, he attended Atlanta University where he finished in 1894 with the bachelor of arts degree.

Returning to Jacksonville, he became Principal of the Stanton Grade School. Johnson studied through personal observation, teaching practices in vogue at the white grammar school for the purpose of improving Stanton. In addition, arousing the interest of the twenty-six graduates of the eight grades at Stanton and gaining the support of their parents, Johnson continued to teach them from programs based on the Junior Prep course at Atlanta University. Soon, having gained permission to add two assistants over a brief period of time, he converted Stanton into a high school, which the Superintendent having supported him, the Board of Education accepted as a fait accompli. Johnson remained the principal of Stanton four years. His elder brother, Rosamond, a skilled musician, taught music there for a brief period.

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While building structural conditons appear to be sound, several architectural repairs would be required to restore the building. A store has been built between the corner building. A store has been built between the corner building and #185, which once led to a side yard and through to 136th Street. The exterior brick work is in need of cleaning and painting. The structure does stand out architecturally, on this end of 135th Street. The Harlem Y.M.C.A. is located across the street and a addition to the "Y" has been built adjacent to #187, on the east side. The location of some major black professional offices and other social centers are located in this section of Harlem (135th and Seventh Avenue). Their presence enhances the potential of this site as a landmark.

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Johnson became involved in two other careers, journalism and law. With a few friends, he founded The Daily American, the first Negro daily newspaper of his native city, if not the entire country as believed by Johnson. Despite an auspicious start advocating civil rights, the paper lasted only eight months. Undaunted, he then studied law. Reading and learning the intricacies of law in 18 months under Attorney Thomas A. Ledwith, a leading white barrister, he passed the bar and was admitted to the practice of law in the state of Florida in 1897. In that same year he opened an office with a close friend, Douglass Wetmore.

Encouraged in their musical aspirations Johnson with his brother Rosamond decided to visit New York in the summer of 1899. The highly exploratory trip enabled them to meet some of the black and white greats and near greats of the New York theatrical world. It also opened their eyes to the immense possibilities of that world. Returning to Jacksonville with his brother, Johnson achieved enduring fame through his notable contribution, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" which later became known as the Negro National Hymn. The piece grew out of a proposed celebration of Lincoln's birthday. Johnson conceived the idea of a song to be written for the occasion. He discussed this with his brother and together they decided to write a song for the exercises. It was to be sung by a chorus of 400 school children. The results, words by James Weldon and music by J. Rosamond, were effectively presented at the celebration as scheduled.

The song increased in popularity and became a must in churches, schools, and on special occasions where black people assembled throughout the South and in other places of the country. Later it was adopted by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and is generally recognized as the Negro National Hymn. James Weldon Johnson stated that he had even heard it sung by white students at the summer labor school at Bryn Mawr, perhaps because he was the guest speaker. On the other hand, the song not mentioning race or ethnic group by name, has universal appeal for any struggling people.

In 1900, the two Johnson brothers back in New York formed a partnership with Bob Cole, a talented black musician, to produce songs and plays. The partnership lasted seven years during which time they wrote some two hundred songs that were sung in various musical shows on Broadway and on the road.

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Their success was notable. At the time their songs were sung in three or four current musical productions on Broadway. Many were hits, including "The Maiden With the Dreamy Eyes," "Mandy, Won't You Let Me Be Your Beau," "Nobody's Lookin But The Owl and The Moon," "Tell Me, Dusky Maiden," "The Old Flag Never Touched the Ground," "Under the Bamboo Tree," "Oh, Didn't He Ramble," and "The Congo Love Song." Not only did the press give the work of the trio favorable reviews but the Ladies Home Journal arranged to publish seven or eight compositions as part of the musical pieces of their regular edition.

Their theatrical success was crowned when Mr. A. L. Erlanger, the grand mogul in the theatrical business, invited them to write exclusively for Klaw-Erlanger productions. After careful consideration they decided to sign a lucrative contract for a limited period of three years.

The theatrical experience of James Weldon Johnson was more than a personal highway to success. It evidenced that he, a black man with his two partners, on a competitive basis were equal to the best white composers, and that black people through creativity in music contributed to the culture of America.

Returning from a European theatrical tour in 1904, Johnson joined Theodore Roosevelt's successful Presidential Campaign. The trio wrote a campaign song for "Teddy" and Johnson became chairman of the newly established House Committee and later president of the New York Colored Republican Club. For his work, President Roosevelt appointed him as U. S. Consul at Puerto Cabello, Venezuela in 1907. Two years later he was sent to Nicaragua in the same capacity, serving during the revolution there and the beginning of the American intervention which eventually led to the treaty permitting the United States to build a canal across the country.

While in Nicaragua he completed his one and only novel, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, which was published in 1912. This book, according to J. Saunders Redding, established Johnson's concern with the social problems that beset black people and his commitment to finding solutions. In addition, it qualified as a high piece of fiction by a black author.

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Returning to New York with his wife, Grace Neil, whom he had married in 1910, Johnson became contributing editor of the New York Age, the oldest black New York newspaper. He remained with the Age for ten years.

Meanwhile he resumed activity in the musical field. He took part in the organization of the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP). In addition, upon invitation he translated into English the libretto to "Goyescas," the Spanish grand opera produced at the Metropolitan Opera in 1915.

After attending a conference at the home of Joel E. Spingarn, Johnson introduced Governor Charles Whitman, and delivered a paper. Johnson assumed the new office of Field Secretary of the NAACP in 1925, turning to his task with enthusiasm and skill. Johnson immediately addressed himself to organizing the South by increasing the number of local branches in southern cities. He called for the preparation of a manual for branches which set forth the aims of the organization, the plan for organizing branches and the laws by which the branches would be governed. Although not overwhelmingly successful in the beginning, it did lay the ground work for what the national Association called its "Southern Empire."

During the period of 1916-1930 when Johnson served with the NAACP, the last ten years as general secretary, he was a militant crusader demanding for blacks political and cultural equality projecting and executing strategy for the attainment thereof. Of the struggles and protests he mounted, three concerning the United States and one pertaining to Haiti stand-out for the impact they made on the nation in the advancement of democracy. The first was the Silent Protest Parade, July 28, 1917, which Johnson suggested to the Harlem Branch in lieu of a mass meeting at Carnegie Hall to protest the East St. Louis Riot.

Reaction to the East St. Louis Massacres soon came. But it was the parade that reflected black universal protest and impressed many Americans. Nine or ten thousand blacks marched silently down Fifth Avenue to the sound only of muffled drums.

The second related to the Houston Affair. A battalion of the Twenty-fourth Infantry, one of the black regiments of the regular army, was stationed at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Hearing that Corporal Baltimore, the most popular non-commissioned officer of the outfit and one of the most experienced soldiers in the regiment had been seriously beaten and killed, the battalion retaliated by "shooting up" Houston. Two blacks and seventeen whites including five Houston policemen were killed.

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Only the black soldiers were charged with the crime. The NAACP official sent to investigate discovered that the ill will between the Houston police and the black soldiers was cumulative growing out of friction concerning jurisdiction of the soldiers while in the city. Sixty-three members of the regiment were courtmartialled. Before daylight on December 11, 1917, almost surreptitiously, thirteen of them were hanged.

Blacks throughout the country were agony stricken and felt that the brutal and insulting treatment of the men had been considered as extenuating circumstances. In the subsequent courtmartial sixteen more of the men were sentenced to be hanged, fifty-one to life imprisonment and five to long terms.

A committee of four, with James Weldon Johnson the spokesman hastened to Washington to present a petition of twelve thousand signatures to President Wilson asking for executive clemency for the condemned men. In presenting the petition Johnson emphasized that they represented not just the signers but the entire black population and requested that clemency be granted to those under the death penalty, as well as the others whose cases were to be reviewed. Johnson justified his request not only on the history of the particular regiment but on all the soldiers who had served the United States throughout its entire history and the loyalty of the twelve million Negroes that placed them beside the loyalty of the original stock arriving at Plymouth and Jamestown. He condemned the hanging of the thirteen men without opportunity of appeal as punishment so drastic and unusual in the history of the nation that the execution of the additional members would to the colored people savor of vengeance rather than justice. Although President Wilson made no strong response he was impressed. The President did, however, take some action. Sixteen of the twenty-four sentenced to die after a review of their cases, he commuted the sentence of them to life imprisonment and affirmed the death of six. He also made a strong utterance against lynching and mob violence. The National Association continued to work for the men in prison. It secured the commutation of the sentences of some and eventually, the release on parole of the entire number.

As head of the NAACP Johnson worked unrelentently for the rights of blacks. He lobbied in Washington for two years in support of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill. Though the bill did not pass it made an impact on the nation by bringing to light the savagery faced by blacks and the necessity of taking steps to end the evil.

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Johnson's next concern had to do with foreign relations in which he headed a commission of the NAACP to investigate conditions in Haiti as after the American occupation. Johnson's mission was occasioned by the constant rumors leaking from Haiti that the American occupation forces there were guilty of misrule and gross abuse of natives.

Arriving in Haiti, Mr. Johnson through careful investigation not only confirmed the allegations but produced a detailed report that became the basis for governmental investigation as well as the basis for four articles that appeared in The Nation and elsewhere and a lecture which was published, Self-Determining Haiti. In addition, he furnished his findings to Warren G. Harding, Republican candidate for the presidency, who made the Haitian matter a campaign issue.

While in Haiti, Johnson, when questioned about what the Haitians could do for themselves, recommended the formation of an NAACP. The idea was accepted and Union Patriotique was established in Port-au-Prince with branches in important towns and cities. This organization became a vital force in advancing the restoration of Haitian independence.

During the period 1916-1930 when he served so effectively with the NAACP, Johnson continued the cultivation of his literary creativity and made several notable contributions. In 1917, he published Fifty Years and Other Poems, in which he combined many of his former poems. In 1922 his pioneering anthology, Book of American Negro Poetry, appeared. This work included poetry by black Americans beginning with Phillis Wheatley, 1773, and coming down to Paul Laurence Dunbar in the 1900s with a sprinkling of black poets of South America, Cuba, and the West Indies. In the introductory essay on "The Creative Genius of the Negro," which focused on the Negro as a folk artist, Johnson pointed out black contributions to the national culture. Among the contributions noted by him were: the Uncle Remus stories, spirituals or slave songs, ragtime, and such dances as the cakewalk, buck and wing, stop time, turkey trot, eagle rock, and balling the jack.

In 1925, with his brother who made the piano arrangements, Johnson collected several score spirituals which were published as the Book of American Negro Spirituals. The work had instantaneous success and was followed by a Second Book of Spirituals in the following year.

In 1925, Johnson was awarded the coveted Spingarn Medal as "author, diplomat and public servant." God's Trombones: Seven Sermons in Verse which brought Johnson national attention as a poet appeared in 1927. Discarding Negro dialect and employing instead the "native idiom of the Negro speech" without distortion, Johnson broke new literary ground for black authors. In 1927 God's Trombones won the Harmon Award for Mr. Johnson. About

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the same time, "The Creation" was produced at Town Hall under the direction of Sergei Koussevitzky with a portion of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Jules Bledsoe, the gifted black baritone.

Black Manhattan which came out in 1930 the same year Johnson became Professor of Creative Literature at Fisk University is a picture of Negro Harlem as Johnson knew it with some background of history etched in. It places emphasis on the artistic and cultural achievements of blacks who have contributed to the national common cultural store and thus enables one to see how blacks have helped to form American civilization.

Johnson was awarded the W. E. B. Du Bois Prize of \$1,000 for Black Manhattan as outstanding work of non-fiction prose by a Negro writer during the period 1930-32. Along This Way, Johnson's autobiography appeared in 1933. It's value as an honest account and first rate memoir as well as a great historical document is attested by eight printings in ten years. It remains preeminently the main source of any account of James Weldon Johnson and his times. Bruce Catton regards the work not only as an "enduring part of twentieth century America's literary and general history, but a case book on race relations, a study of human triumph over prejudice and handicaps."

In 1935, Johnson wrote Negro Americans, What Now? In this brief but thought provoking work, he outlined the racial situation as he saw it at the time and suggested ways to address the problems.

James Weldon Johnson died in an automobile accident in Maine in 1938. He was widely mourned and memorialized. For more than forty years he had been one of the foremost black leaders of the United States and a public personage of high rank in literature, music, diplomacy and public affairs. He had touched (all) America, both white and black and America was better for it. The tribute of Dean Payne with whom he was closely associated at New York University is representatively indicative of the high esteem in which he was held. "His contributions to the culture of America were second only to his contribution to a better understanding between men. As a public servant, educator, and author, he has left much that will never die."

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1. James Weldon Johnson, Negro Americans, What Now ? (New York: the Viking Press, 1934), p. 99.
2. Johnson, Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson (New York: the Viking Press), p. 290.

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Johnson, James Weldon. Black Manhattan. Athaneum Edition with Preface by Allan Spear. Kingsport, Tennessee: Kingsport Press, 1968.

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Gloster, Hugh Mossis. Negro Voices in American Fiction. Chapel Hill, N. C. : The University of North Carolina Press, 1948.

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