



The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County

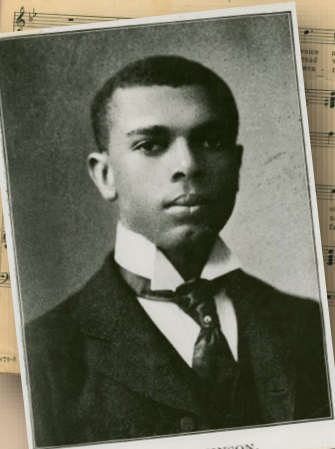


"Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing"

(1899)

"The Negro National Anthem"

Words by
JAMES WELDON JOHNSON
Music by
J. ROSAMOND JOHNSON



JAMES W. JOHNSON

"Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" was written in 1899, by American author, educator, lawyer, diplomat, poet, songwriter, and civil rights activist, James Weldon Johnson.

At the time, James Weldon Johnson was principal of the Edwin M. Stanton School, in Jacksonville, Florida, a primary school named for President Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of War.

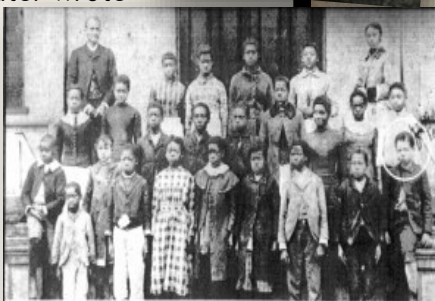


John Rosamond Johnson

Edwin M. Stanton was an ardent champion of human rights and an advocate of free, formal education for African-American children. As the principal, James was asked to prepare a speech for the upcoming birthday-anniversary celebration of President Abraham Lincoln. But, instead of preparing a traditional speech, Johnson wrote the powerful and lyrical poem, "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," invoking images of the struggle and resilience of his ancestors. Upon its completion, James presented the poem to his younger brother, composer and singer, John Rosamond Johnson, and together they set the brilliant piece of poetry to music.

The following year, on February 12th, 1900, on what would have been Lincoln's 91st birthday, five-hundred Edwin M. Stanton school children performed the song for the first time. James Weldon Johnson later wrote about the emotional performance stating "I could not keep back the tears, and made no effort to do so."

By 1919, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had adopted "Lift Every Voice and Sing" as their official song and proclaimed it "The Negro National Anthem."



Stanton School Elementary Class, about 1882 J. W. Johnson in first

Lift ev'ry voice and sing,
'Til earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the list'ning skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith
that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope
that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun
of our new day begun,
Let us march on 'til victory is won.
Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope
unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for
which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with
tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path
through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
'Til now we stand at last
Where the white gleam
of our bright star is cast.
God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who has brought us thus far
on the way;
Thou who has by Thy might
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places,
our God, where we met Thee,
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine
of the world, we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand,
True to our God,
True to our native land.