

The Clerk's Black History Series



Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



John Arthur "Jack" Johnson

(March 31, 1878 – June 10, 1946)

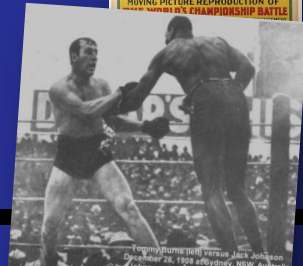
First African-American World Heavyweight Boxing Champion



John Arthur "Jack" Johnson was born in Galveston, Texas, in 1878, the first son of Henry and Tina Johnson, two former slaves who worked as a janitor and dishwasher to support their nine children. His father, Henry, also served as a civilian teamster of the Union's 38th Colored Infantry, and was a role model for his son. In spite of his father's small frame, Jack Johnson grew to be an intimidating 6'2", earning the nickname, "The Galveston Giant." After completing only a few years of school, Johnson dropped out and began working on boats and sculleries in Galveston. At the age of 16, he traveled to New York and Boston before returning home to fight in his first unofficial bout. After winning a local fight and taking home a prize of \$1.50, Johnson began seeking bigger opponents. His boxing skills were sharpened when he met Walter Lewis who taught Johnson to use his size and strength to strike his opponents. Although he fought in a series of fights, earning his a reputation amongst black fighters, Johnson had his



eyes set on a bigger prize, Heavy Weight Champion. The current Heavy Weight Champion title was held by white boxer, Jim Jeffries, but Jeffries, like other white boxers, refused to fight Johnson. But Jack Johnson, being a spirited and talented fighter, caught the attention of Tommy Burns, a white fighter who succeeded Jeffries in his retirement as Heavy Weight Champion. Jack Johnson followed Tommy burns around the world, taunting him and vying for a chance at the title. Finally, when promoters promised Burns a \$30,000 prize, the two met in Sydney, Australia. The fight proved to be more than Burns could handle and in the 14th round, in front of 20,000 spectators, the fight was mercifully stopped, by the police.



For the first time in history, in December 1908, a black man wore the title of Heavy Weight Champion. But, since Jim Jeffries had carried the title for so long before Tommy Burns, Jack Johnson had one more thing to prove. He called continuously for Jim Jeffries to come out of retirement and step into the ring. After being pressured by Johnson and members of the white community that wanted redemption, Jeffries agreed.

"Fight of the Century"

On July 4, 1910, in Reno, Nevada, Jim F. Jeffries, dubbed "The Boilermaker" met Jack Johnson, "The Galveston Giant" in the ring. Racial tensions were high during the time leading up to this fight. Many of Jeffries' supporters didn't like the way Johnson boasted about taking the Heavy Weight Champion title away from Burns. They also didn't like the fact that Johnson had married a white woman. Johnson thrived on the publicity leading up to the fight.



Johnson vs Jeffries, 1910

While Jeffries was met with cheers, Jack Johnson was introduced to a hostile crowd. Adding to the tension, Jeffries also refused to shake Johnson's hand before the fight. Although Jeffries began the fight aggressively, Johnson pummeled the former champ leaving him on the mat at least three times in the 14th round. By the 15th round, Jeffries' corner threw in the towel. Police again jumped into the ring, however this time, it was to prevent a riot. Jack Johnson was pronounced the winner by decision but the win came with consequences as news of race riots spread throughout America. The Fight of the Century earned Johnson \$65,000 and silenced the critics. Johnson was the undisputed Heavy Weight Champion of the World. As riots and incidents of violence continued, so did the jubilant celebrations and parades in his honor.



Johnson went on to have a turbulent career and life after the "Fight of the Century," but his story of becoming the First African-American Heavy Weight Champion remains one of the greatest boxing stories told.

On June 10, 1946, John Arthur "Jack" Johnson died in a car crash in Franklinton, North Carolina after racing away from a diner that refused to serve him. He is buried in Graceland Cemetery in Chicago.

In 1969, Actor James Earl Jones won a Tony Award for portraying Johnson in "The Great White Hope."