

# James Weldon Johnson Day

Report to the  
Maine Legislature

FEBRUARY 2023



**Permanent  
Commission**  
RACIAL, INDIGENOUS  
& TRIBAL POPULATIONS

# In Memoriam

The members of the James Weldon Johnson Task force wish to dedicate this report to the memory of the late Reverend Alfred M. Niese, Jr., whose loss we grieve and whose profound humanity, wisdom, and kindness did much to inspire and motivate our collective efforts.



*"The brief blessing of this site that I add now is not something I do alone, waving a rhetorical wand or something. It is, I believe, something we all do. It is not just for me but on your behalf that I offer thanks to the Giver for the life of James Weldon Johnson.*

*Almighty God, whom your faithful servant James Weldon Johnson in his most famous poem, The Creation, envisioned you toiling over a lump of clay and blowing into it the breath of life that we might each become a living soul — be with us, Lord, on this significant day.*

*Bless, O Lord, this space: Accept our gratitude for James, for his revealing to us in song, in word and in deed, the stubbornness of our evil; the meaning of humility, forgiveness and justice; and for challenging us to take courage and embrace the hope for a new day for all people.*

*May those who pass this way in years to come learn of James Weldon Johnson's life and find grace to align their lives with his more and more, day by day. May their actions always bear evidence of this.*

*Thus, may this memorial space where James Weldon Johnson breathed his last and shed his blood, thus may this space forever be 'holy ground.' Amen." — Reverend Al Niese*

**September 12, 1937 - August 15, 2022**



**Residents of Wiscasset, historians, artists, representatives, and other stakeholders gathered on Oct. 23 to discuss the future of an observance of James Weldon Johnson Day and a memorial to the civil rights figure near the site of his death. (Nate Poole photo)**



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This report was written by Meadow Dibble, who in her former role as Acting Director of Community-engaged Research with the Permanent Commission served as project lead on the James Weldon Johnson Day Observance 2022.

# Bill Summary

LD 1441, An Act To Create a James Weldon Johnson Annual Observance Day and an Observance Task Force, was sponsored by Representative Rachel Talbot Ross of Portland and co-sponsored by Senators Cloe Maxmin and Craig Hickman alongside Representatives Rich Evans, Stephen Hanley, and Ann Matlack in Maine's first special session of the 130th Legislature.

This initiative grew out of collaborative efforts among committed individuals wishing to honor the civil rights leader and bring greater visibility to Maine's Black history—particularly those of a cohort based in Jacksonville, Florida, where Johnson was born in 1871, and another in Wiscasset, Maine, where his exemplary life in service of racial justice ended all too soon in 1938.

The bill called on the Governor of Maine to issue a proclamation each year recognizing June 17th as James Weldon Johnson Day. It additionally directed the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations to convene a James Weldon Johnson Observance Task Force charged with developing programming to commemorate his life, honor his many remarkable contributions, and encourage others to take up the torch of racial justice. The bill passed on June 20, 2021.

James Weldon Johnson (June 17, 1871 – June 26, 1938) was an African American novelist and poet, a songwriter and educator, an attorney and a diplomat. He was a stalwart leader in the fight against racial discrimination, segregation, violence, and lynching in the United States and served for a decade as executive secretary of the NAACP. Among his many accomplishments, he penned the lyrics to the song “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” which holds tremendous importance for Black Americans and has been considered for designation as the official national hymn of the United States of America.<sup>1</sup>

“This is a fitting way to remember a man whose contributions to American history are extraordinary, who spent his leisure time enjoying our beautiful state, and who was here when he ultimately lost his life too soon,” stated bill sponsor Representative Talbot Ross.

Task Force members were expected to develop methods by which to educate the public on James Weldon Johnson's life and legacy. They were additionally charged with studying models for formally observing and promoting figures of importance; connecting with local, regional, and national efforts in his honor; and exploring opportunities to memorialize Mr. Johnson's life, such as by holding annual events and programs, forging sister state and city relationships, designing a walking trail, placing a commemorative marker, developing links to cultural heritage tourism, or founding a creative writing scholarship in name.

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<sup>1</sup> See [H.R. 301](#).



“As an activist, poet, diplomat, attorney, teacher, and lyricist, James Weldon Johnson lived a life of service, benefiting not only Black people, but all Americans.

He lived and worked amongst a generation of men and women active in “racial uplift” at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Henry MacNeil Turner, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper – and Johnson’s contributions are many, not the least of which was serving as the NAACP’s Executive Secretary...

Recognizing Mr. Johnson with a Day of Observance would provide teachers and religious leaders, as two examples, an opportunity to educate others about this time period, and to urge others, as Johnson urged us to “Fac[e] the rising sun of our new day begun, Let us march on ’til victory is won.”

Just as importantly, LD 1441 establishes a task force to examine other ways to extend Mr. Johnson’s work and, as a historian who lives less than a mile from Wiscasset, I’d be happy to contribute to this work.”

— Representative Allison Hepler

District 53: Arrowsic, Dresden, Georgetown, Phippsburg, Richmond (part), Woolwich



“I strongly support a day honoring the life of James Weldon Johnson who had ties to the Midcoast and happened to be here when he died. Of his many talents and accomplishments, his anthem “Lift Every Voice” is a profound and lasting gift to the people of this country. As a professional musician and pianist, I have performed it on many occasions and know the lasting inspiration it will hold for generations. As an everyday American, and at this juncture of our civic conversation about our democracy—and Black Lives Matter, in particular—this is an opportunity to honor the values we hold by honoring a man whose life was a superior example of the best we can be as human beings and as citizens of this country and this beautiful state.”


— Terry Heller, Wiscasset Select Board

# October 2021 Visioning Event

To lay the groundwork for James Weldon Johnson Day 2022, in the fall of 2021 the Permanent Commission charged incoming Acting Director of Community-Engaged Research Meadow Dibble with convening a small organizing committee that included bill sponsor Representative Rachel Talbot Ross, community organizer Lucia Droby from Wiscasset, and former Florida state Senator Tony Hill. This committee set to work designing a day-long program aimed at educating the local community about this seminal figure in our state and national history and soliciting input from a broad range of stakeholders about ways he might be commemorated.

Thanks to vigorous outreach efforts and an [article](#) in the *Wiscasset Newspaper*, a call was broadcast inviting all interested parties to attend a visioning event on Saturday, October 23, 2021 at the Wiscasset Community Center. More than 40 people from near and far gathered at 10:30 am and remained together until 4:00 pm, eager to discuss efforts at the local, state, and national levels to memorialize this extraordinary man and to further his commitment to ending racism. The inspiring day included an opening convocation, a musical tribute, remarks by local elected officials, a documentary preview, presentations by local historians, a luncheon, a brainstorming session, and more.

<i>Agenda</i>	
10:30 am	Refreshments and informal meet & greet
10:45 am	Invocation Dr. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes of Colby College  "Lift Every Voice and Sing" Wiscasset Select Board member Terry Heller on keyboard
10:55 am	Welcome and opening remarks Dr. Meadow Dibble of the Permanent Commission
11:05 am	An Act To Create a James Weldon Johnson Annual Observance Day & Task Force Representative Rachel Talbot Ross, Permanent Commission
11:15 am	James Weldon Johnson documentary trailer Filmmaker Sonya Dunn
11:25 am	Honoring James Weldon Johnson in Wiscasset Wiscasset Select Board Member Kim Andersson
11:35 am	History of the commemoration project in Wiscasset Wiscasset citizen and organizer Lucia Droby
11:45 am	Honoring James Weldon Johnson in Jacksonville & beyond Former Florida Senator Tony Hill
11:55 am	Creative placemaking and the place of J.W. Johnson in history Public arts consultant Tony Allegretti
12:05 pm	The importance of public art in shaping public memory Sculptor Andreas von Huene
12:15 pm	The Maine of James Weldon Johnson's day Historian Bob Greene
12:25 pm	Developing cultural heritage tourism Abbe Levin of the Maine Office of Tourism
12:30 pm	Open forum conversation
1:00 pm	Lunch & interactives
1:40 pm	Launching a visioning process
1:50 pm	Working group sessions
2:25 pm	Open forum conversation
2:45 pm	Closing remarks by Representative Rachel Talbot Ross
3:00 pm	Blessing of the site with Reverend Alfred Niese



**"Main Street, Wiscasset" by Anthony Watkins, oil on canvas, 18" x 24"**

*The members of the Permanent Commission wish to extend their deep thanks to Organizing Committee members Lucia Droby and Tony Hill, as well as to Reverend Al Niese who launched this remembrance project in 2013. We are also very grateful to all those who have come from near and far to share their knowledge, experience, and perspectives at today's gathering. Special thanks to the Wiscasset Select Board, Wiscasset Community Center, Friends of Wiscasset Village, and the Maine Office of Tourism.*



Following the forum, attendees and presenters met at the train tracks on Main Street in Wiscasset where Johnson lost his life when the car carrying him and his wife, Grace Nail Johnson, collided with a train in 1938. It was here that the late Reverend Al Niese of Woolwich, who first proposed a marker for James Weldon Johnson to the Wiscasset selectmen in 2013, performed a blessing of the site.

A special mention is due to Reverend Al, whose lifelong passion for social justice and civil rights and his deep admiration for the author of *God's Trombones* led him to initiate two evenings of readings and music to commemorate Mr. Johnson; these were held in 2013 in partnership with Reverend Roy Partridge and Reverend Bishop Coleman at Trinity Episcopal Church in Portland and at the Bowdoin College Chapel. Earlier in his career devoted to service, Reverend Al attended Martin Luther King, Jr.'s March on Washington in 1963 and organized transportation to the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March for people traveling from Newark, NJ.

As the October 23 visioning event came to a close, many expressed enthusiasm at the prospect that Wiscasset would serve as the premier site in our state for activating public memory around this inspiring leader's life and legacy, with exciting implications for cultural tourism. Local efforts to memorialize the renowned author of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," would be amplified by a yearly statewide observance, to include celebrations and educational initiatives connected to broader national and international remembrance programs.



Former Florida State  
Senator Tony Hill



Front: Representative Rachel Talbot Ross and historian Bob Greene

The visioning event was filmed. Segments of the program can be viewed at the links below:

**An Act To Create a James Weldon Johnson Annual Observance**

With Representative Rachel Talbot Ross | [Link](#)

**Honoring James Weldon Johnson in Wiscasset**

With Wiscasset Select Board Member Kim Anderson | [Link](#)

**Honoring James Weldon Johnson in Jacksonville & Beyond**

With former Florida state Senator Tony Hill | [Link](#)

**James Weldon Johnson Documentary Preview**

With filmmaker Sonya Dunn | [Link](#)

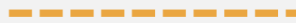


Many people who were unable to attend the visioning event wrote to share supportive and encouraging messages.



“I’m delighted to hear about this initiative. I teach US American literature of the long 19th century at Colby and in future years I would love to involve my students in this initiative in some way.”

— Pr. Katherine Stubbs, Colby College



“I’ve just moved to Maine and am excited to learn more about James Weldon Johnson’s time here as well as the ongoing social justice work of this group!”

— Pr. Dyani Taff, Colby College



“As a nonprofit leader in Wiscasset, I am interested in how Chewonki can support this initiative and integrate it into our educational programs.”

— Willard Morgan, Chewonki

# The James Weldon Johnson Task Force

The Permanent Commission was unable to access funding allocated by the Legislature for staffing until mid-October 2021. This three-month delay resulted in the Commission's inability to hire staff and convene the Task Force with adequate time to report its progress in January 2022.

A public call went out in early January, welcoming expressions of interest from individuals willing to serve on the James Weldon Johnson Task Force. Over two dozen people responded to that call; of those, 21 were offered a seat on the Task Force. Chaired by Representative Rachel Talbot Ross and composed of many distinguished and talented members, the group met biweekly from January 10, 2022 through June 20, 2022 to plan the first annual James Weldon Johnson Day in conjunction with the new paid state holiday of Juneteenth. As charged, members collaborated to develop cultural and educational programming aimed at pursuing Mr. Johnson's commitment to ending systemic racism. Seeking to connect these efforts to broader national and international initiatives, they explored opportunities to memorialize Mr. Johnson's life.

The Permanent Commission is deeply grateful to the members of the James Weldon Johnson Task Force for having lent their wisdom, experience, and expertise to the project of memorializing this extraordinary man and furthering his commitment to ending racism. Full bios for each member can be found in the Appendix section of this report.

## Task Force Members

**Tony Allegretti**, Jacksonville cultural consultant

**Meadow Dibble**, Director of Community-engaged Research, Permanent Commission

**Sonya Dunn**, Filmmaker spearheading Johnson Brothers documentary project

**K. Melanie Edwards**, James Weldon Johnson's grandniece

**James Ford**, Maine Board of Education

**Dr. Rich Evans**, Representing District #120 in the Maine House

**Shannon Gilmore**, Executive Director, Lincoln County Historical Association

**Terry Heller**, Wiscasset Select Board Member

**Allison Hepler**, State Representative and Professor at University of Maine  
Farmington

**Tony Hill**, Former Florida State Senator

**Dusty Jones**, Wiscasset Selectboard Member

**Abbe Levin**, Maine Office of Tourism

**Larissa Malone**, Asst. Professor of Education at University of Southern Maine

**Kate McBrien**, Maine State Archivist

**Jill Minot-Seabrook**, Seacoast African American Cultural Center  
† **Reverend Al Niese** Initiator of the 2013 James W. Johnson commemoration in  
Portland

**Adelaide Solomon-Jordan**, Educator, Board Member Holocaust and Human  
Rights Center

**Robin Talbot**, Associate Director of the Stonecoast MFA program

**Representative Rachel Talbot Ross**, Co-Chair of the Permanent Commission

**Timothy P. Wilson**, Senior Advisor & Director, Maine Seeds Programs

**Yildiz Yilmaz**, Producer, Johnson Brothers documentary project

## Collaborations

The Permanent Commission and the James Weldon Johnson Task Force collaborated over many months with committed partners at the local, state, and national level to design programming aimed at educating communities about Black history and elevating public conversations about racial justice.

At the local level, public engagement efforts involved collaborating with members of the Wiscasset Select Board as well as with Wiscasset Town Manager Dennis Simmons, the director and staff of Wiscasset Public Library, as well as with members of the Wiscasset Creative Alliance, Friends of Wiscasset Village, Wiscasset Chamber of Commerce, Lincoln County Historical Association, and St. Philip's Episcopal Church.

Important partners at the state level included the Maine Office of Tourism, Maine State Archives, Maine State Library, Maine Humanities Council, and the organization Conscious Revolution. The Governor's Office collaborated on issuing a proclamation and ensuring that a representative of Governor Janet Mills was present at the June 17 event to read it.

## James Weldon Johnson Book Group

In the lead-up to the June 17 Observance, with support from Wiscasset Public Library and the Maine Humanities Council, Leigh Anne Keichline and James Ford collaborated to lead a book group devoted to the works of James Weldon Johnson. Over the course of three meetings, participants gathered to discuss the novel *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and select poetry from the author's *Complete Poems*. Janet McKenney, Director of Library Development at the Maine State Library, shared a list of study guides and other resources for book groups focused on the works of James Weldon Johnson.

**DISCUSSION PROJECT**

maine humanities council

The life and legacy of James Weldon Johnson

facilitated by James Ford & Leigh Anne Keichline

Wed 6/1, Tues 6/7, Mon 6/13 all at 5:30pm

Join for one discussion or all three!

On Zoom

small Leigh Anne Keichline to register: popersodsbute@gmail.com

Join us for a series of discussions: grounded in two books by the civil rights activist, author & lawyer James Weldon Johnson who was killed in Wiscasset in 1938.

MHC will provide complimentary books for fifteen participants OR You can support your local independent bookstore and purchase at Sternman's Book Shop in Damascus

DISCUSSION PROJECT's offer comprehensive support to individuals and organizations of over Maine who want to connect members of their community for rich discussions, grounded in facts, of things that matter to them. | mainehumanities.org

MHC

James Weldon Johnson Task Force

# James Weldon Johnson Day 2022

Friday, June 17, 2022 marked Maine's first annual James Weldon Johnson Day. Over 75 people from around the state of Maine and from as far away as Jacksonville, Florida gathered in Wiscasset to attend the day-long celebration that was held at St. Philip's church, on the town Common, and on the lawn of the Wiscasset Public Library.

With JWJ Day falling on the same weekend as the new state and federal holiday, Juneteenth, Task Force members designed a [three-day series of events](#) from June 17-19 with the goal of shining a light on Maine's Black history. The June 17 gathering featured two panel discussions, poetry and theatrical performances, remarks by state dignitaries, a luncheon, a documentary preview screening, and a groundbreaking ceremony at the site of a memorial bench constructed in honor of Mr. Johnson. The event was a resounding success (see ["Maine celebrates James Weldon Johnson Day in Wiscasset"](#)).





## **Friday, June 17 | Wiscasset, Maine**

### **MORNING PROGRAM AT ST. PHILIP'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

10:30 am	Welcome by Representative Rachel Talbot Ross
10:40	Remarks by state officials
10:50	Remarks by representatives from the Town of Wiscasset
11:00	Remarks by K. Melanie Edwards, grand-niece of J.W. Johnson
11:10	Original poetry by Portland Poet Laureate Maya Williams
11:20	Performance of J.W. Johnson's poetry by Linda Ashe-Ford
11:30	Chorus: "Lift Every Voice and Sing" and other hymns
11:40	Prayer led by Reverend Kenneth Lewis

### **MIDDAY PROGRAM AT THE WISCASSET TOWN COMMON**

12:00 pm	Unveiling of a James Weldon Johnson memorial project at the Town Common
12:30	Lunch at the Wiscasset Library

### **AFTERNOON PROGRAM AT ST. PHILIP'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

2:00 pm	Documentary preview and panel discussion about the life and legacy of James Weldon Johnson with filmmaker Sonya Dunn, former Florida state Senator Tony Hill, J.W. Johnson's grand-niece Melanie Edwards, and Jacksonville cultural consultant Tony Allegretti
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The June 17 Observance culminated in the unveiling of a hand-crafted memorial bench in honor of Mr. Johnson. Built by Wiscasset Select Board member Dusty Jones, the bench is a gift of the Permanent Commission's James Weldon Johnson Observance Task Force. It now graces the town Common. The memorial proposal submitted to the Wiscasset Select Board is included in the Appendix section.

















# Juneteenth Weekend Celebration

Related programming continued throughout the weekend. The Permanent Commission hosted a panel event on Saturday, June 18 at the Maine Maritime Museum in Bath that was attended by more than 80 guests. On Sunday, members of the Permanent Commission were invited to speak at Westbrook's Juneteenth Celebration.

## Saturday, June 18 | Bath, Maine

### RECOVERING MAINE'S BLACK HISTORY | MAINE MARITIME MUSEUM

1:00 pm

A panel discussion on "Recovering Maine's Black History" moderated by Representative Allison Hepler will take place Saturday, June 18, 2022 from 1:00–3:00 pm at Maine Maritime Museum's Long Reach Hall in Bath.

This event is hosted by the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations in the context of the James Weldon Johnson and Juneteenth observances.

Community researchers and citizen historians Bob Greene, Vana Carmona, Kathy Ostrander Roberts, James Tanzer, and Lisa Simpson Lutts will share with the public what they are uncovering about the lives and contributions of people of African heritage in communities from Castine to Kennebunk and well beyond.



## Sunday, June 19 | Westbrook, Maine

### JUNETEENTH FREEDOM CELEBRATION | RIVERBANK PARK

1:00 pm

Join us for an afternoon of music, speakers, art, and history, commemorating Juneteenth at Riverbank Park in Westbrook, Maine, on Sunday, June 19th from 1-3pm.

- Speakers include Bishop Steve Coleman, Rep Rachel Talbot Ross, Mayor Foley, and Historian Bob Greene
- Art projects led by Westbrook High Students include hair beading, step dance classes, face painting, and more
- Music provided by Westbrook High School Chamber Singers and 107.9 WJZP, Portland's only minority-owned radio station

Everyone is welcome to dance, listen and learn at this inaugural Juneteenth event, hosted by One Westbrook and the City of Westbrook.

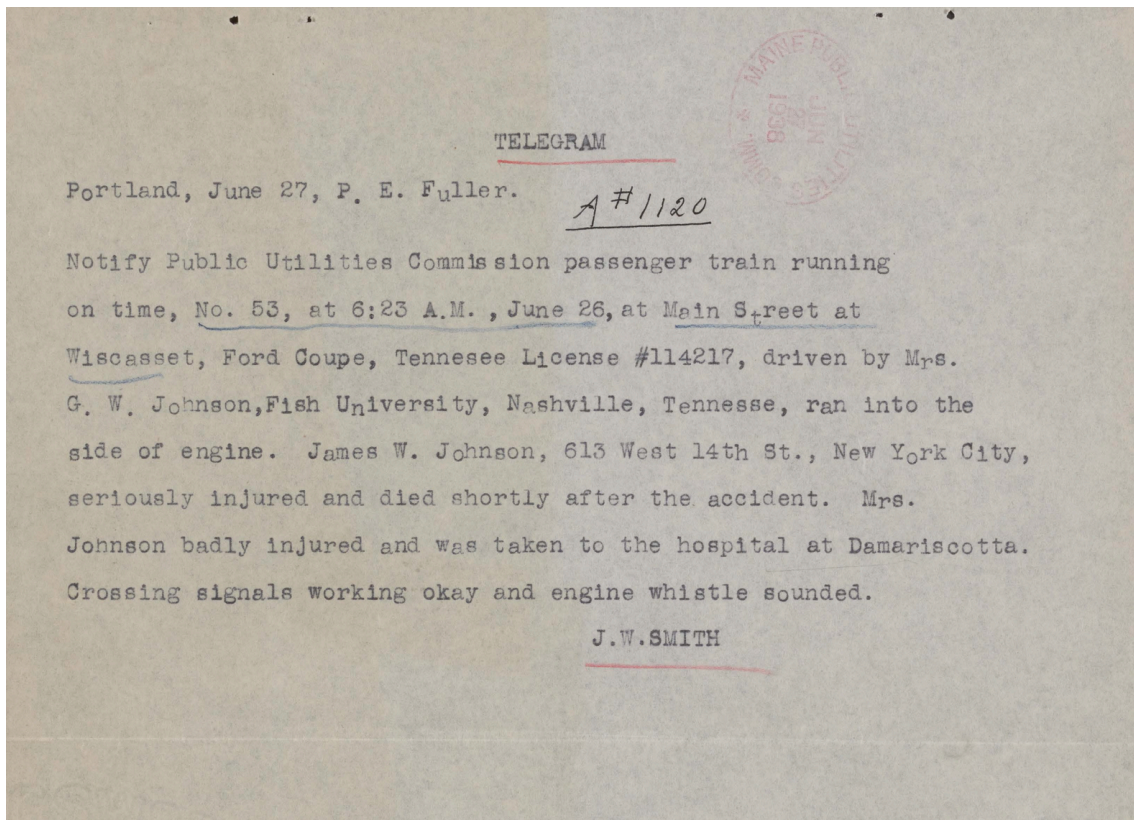






## Research

Thanks to concerted efforts by Task Force member and State Archivist Kate McBrien, the team managed to unearth, digitize, and begin analyzing the [long-buried court and hospital records](#) related to the Wiscasset accident that cost Mr. Johnson his life and prompted his widow to pursue a wrongful death suit against Central Maine Railroad in 1943. The Task Force has made an important contribution to historical scholarship by bringing this significant missing piece to the attention of Mr. Johnson's biographers and sharing it with the public.





# Looking Ahead

## Task Force Recommendations

As Task Force members reflected back on the momentous first annual James Weldon Johnson Day Observance, they felt that future observances should involve:

- Organizing a symposium featuring prominent scholars in conjunction with such institutions as NYU, Fisk, Yale, and Emory
- Designing and fundraising for a memorial garden around the commemorative bench on Wiscasset's town common
- Developing cultural heritage tourism along Route 1 in conjunction with Jacksonville, FL
- Involving students and educators statewide in poetry and design competitions
- Creating a short video about JWJ Day for use in schools
- Collaborating with Maine State Library to provide libraries with JWJ books and displays
- Screening a feature-length documentary on the Johnson Brothers
- Planning thematically related events for children and families
- Securing a major chorale performance

The Permanent Commission remains committed to supporting efforts to mark James Weldon Johnson Day in 2023 and connect the event to Juneteenth. Staff time has been invested to reconvene a number of members of the energetic James Weldon Johnson Task Force and other partners to host a symposium on June 19, 2023.

## The State of Black Maine Symposium

Building on the strong foundation laid in 2021-22, the Permanent Commission has joined forces with a number of organizations to collaboratively design and execute a symposium devoted to annually assessing the "State of Black Maine." This convening will be held yearly on Juneteenth—now a paid state holiday—with the aim of creating and sustaining a public platform that centers Black voices, builds solidarity, and holds space for collective visioning. Through plenary keynote addresses, panel events, performances, and exhibitions, this gathering will contribute to developing a deeper understanding of and appreciation for Maine's Black History while examining the current status of the state's Black populations. It will inform efforts to integrate Black history into the curriculum, raise awareness about existing racial disparities, foreground solutions to closing those gaps, and showcase Black brilliance and joy.

# Appendix

## Task Force Member Bios (current as of June 2022)



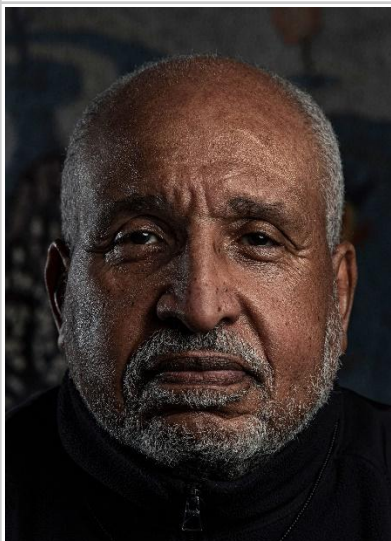
**Representative Rachel Talbot Ross** is serving her third term in the Maine House, where she represents Portland's District 40 and serves the Democratic caucus as Assistant House Majority Leader. She is the first and only Black woman elected to the Maine Legislature and to legislative leadership. As a lawmaker, Talbot Ross has worked extensively on justice reform and has shaped critical conversations about equity for all Mainers. She sponsored successful legislation to create Maine's Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations, which she now chairs. In that role, she has led efforts to fundamentally shift the way lawmakers evaluate public policy by incorporating analysis on the impact of generational racial disparities and to address systemic racism. Talbot Ross also secured passage of a landmark bill expanding tribal legal authority over domestic violence against Native Americans. A ninth-generation Mainer and longtime public servant, Talbot Ross has dedicated her career to social justice. Prior to her time in the Legislature, she led the NAACP in Maine and founded several nonprofit organizations, including Maine Black Community Development, Inc., Maine Freedom Trails, and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Fellows.



**Former Senator Dr. Tony Hill** currently serves as Field Representative for Congressman Al Lawson, Jr. Tony Hill previously served as Federal Policy Director for former Mayor Alvin Brown. He is a Life Member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. (Theta Phi Chapter) and holds numerous other prestigious honors including Chair of the NAACP Florida State Conference Labor Roundtable, Founder of the Achieve, Instill & Inspire Foundation, which provides scholarships for African American and Latino males to attend college in the field of education. Senator Hill currently holds two Honorary Doctorate of Law degrees, the first from Edward Waters College in 1995 and most recently from Bethune-Cookman University. He received a rare and prestigious honor and joined the ranks of a select group of men when inducted into the historic Montford Point Marine Association Hall of Fame. Senator Hill served a three-year term on the Board of Directors of Neighbor to Family (NTF), a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization dedicated to foster placement for sibling groups. A dedicated humanitarian and community advocate, Senator Hill sponsored a bill to create the first-ever State Capitol Civil Rights Hall of Fame, making Florida the first state in the nation's history to have such a Civil Rights Hall of Fame.



**Shannon Gilmore** is Executive Director of Lincoln County Historical Association and President of the Pejepscot History Center Board of Trustees. She holds a bachelor's degree in History from Bowdoin College, where she focused her studies on 19th Century American History. With professional experience in historical research, program development, and museum operations, Shannon enjoys sharing her love of history and her belief that an examination of our past can lead to a greater understanding of the present. Shannon's interest in uncovering lesser-known stories of place led her to enroll at Goucher College where she is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Historic Preservation.



**Tim Wilson** has more than 50 years of experience in education, public service and athletic coaching. Currently, Tim serves as Senior Advisor to Seeds of Peace, an organization that he has been with since its founding in 1993, and Director of its Maine Seeds Programs. Until 2006, he was the Director of both the Seeds of Peace Camp in Maine and the Seeds of Peace Center for Coexistence in Jerusalem. Prior to and during the early years of his appointment with Seeds of Peace, Tim served as the Director of Multicultural Programs for Pierce Atwood Consulting in Portland, Maine. Tim has been appointed by three Maine Governors to posts including Chair of the Maine Human Rights Commission, State Ombudsman, and Associate Commissioner of Programming for the Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation & Corrections. He also served as Director of the State Offices of Community Services, Civil Emergency Preparedness, and Energy. He has been the Associate Headmaster at the Hyde School in Bath, Maine, and the Director of Admissions at Maine Central Institute in Pittsfield.



A pianist, composer, writer, poet, former high school choral director and teacher educator (UT Austin), and for many years a public education policy writer (Texas Senate), **Terry Hobbs Heller, PhD**, left Austin, Texas after 71 years and retired in Wiscasset, Maine in 2017. She was elected to the Wiscasset Selectboard in May, 2021, which effectively ended her retirement. Wiscasset community issues and Town projects, the public schools, economic growth, and waterfront development—as well as rose-gardening and beautification of the historic village—are her current passions. She is co-authoring a small book on the history of a plot of ground in Wiscasset (1622-2022) that is today's Wiscasset Sunken Garden for the Garden Club of Wiscasset (publication, 2023). Her heart's ambition is to write the great American musical comedy by December, 2025 (currently completed through Scene 1). Terry enjoys performing and will sit down at the piano without provocation, but everyone has to sing along.



**Representative Allison Hepler** is serving her second term in the Maine House of Representatives. Hepler teaches history at the University of Maine at Farmington and is the author of “McCarthyism in the Suburbs: Quakers, Communists and the Children’s Librarian.” Hepler has also worked as a printer, a retail store and office coordinator, a magazine production assistant and a steelworker. She is part-owner of her husband’s wooden boat building and repair business in Small Point, Phippsburg. Hepler has lived in Woolwich for nearly four decades and is serving her third term on the Woolwich Selectboard. She believes we can build and maintain a sustainable environment that doesn’t sacrifice jobs.



**Kate McBrien** currently serves as Maine State Archivist, overseeing Maine State Government’s archives and records management programs. As curator of the award winning exhibition “Malaga Island, Fragmented Lives”, Kate is also an historian for the Malaga Island community. She previously held positions as Chief Curator and Director of Public Engagement at the Maine Historical Society and as the Curator of Historic Collections for the Maine State Museum.



**Dusty Jones** served in the Navy as a nuclear power plant electrician, including four years on the USS Carl Vinson. After leaving the Navy, he earned Bachelor and Master degrees in Behavior Analysis from the University of North Texas. He worked as a behavior analyst throughout the United States and in the UK, serving individuals with developmental disabilities, autism and acquired brain injury, child victims of abuse and neglect, care and educational staff of residential institutions, and teachers and students in Special Education. He specialized in strength-based, skill-development programs utilizing positive reinforcement and eliminating negative control strategies to address severe challenging behavior. He is now serving his first term as a member of the Wiscasset Selectboard. He has four wonderful kids, and in his spare time he is a woodworker, tree enthusiast and writer.





**Reverend Al Niese** is an Episcopal minister, retired from 35 years in urban and suburban churches in NJ. While in Newark, he was inspired during the 60's by Gustav Heningburg and other civil rights leaders. As a teen-ager, he had been deeply affected by a reading of James Weldon Johnson's God's Trombones sermon poem, "The Creation." In 2013, Al sought the help of the Rev. Kenneth I. Lewis and Bowdoin's Dr. Roy Partridge in producing a memorial tribute in Portland's Trinity Church to the poet and civil rights leader. The celebration marked the 75th anniversary of his death in Wiscasset and included music from Green Memorial AME Zion Church and dramatic readings of four poems from God's Trombones. The service ended with over 300 people singing, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," and a community conversation in the church followed. Al is grateful to Rep. Rachel Talbot Ross, former state senator Tony Hill and Lucia Droby of Wiscasset, and others, for introducing the entire legacy of James Weldon Johnson into Maine's experience through an annual June 17 observance.



**Melanie Edwards** worked in education for forty years, primarily at The Modern School, where she was a teacher as well as the Director of Curriculum Development, among other roles. Following the closing of The Modern School, she has worked at Fordham University, the Schomburg Library, and the East Harlem Council for Community Improvement. Throughout her career in education, she has maintained an interest in photography. Ms. Edwards has a Bachelor of Science in Mass Communications from Emerson College. Melanie Edwards is writing a biography of her grandfather J. Rosamond Johnson, who was an actor, composer, musicologist, and author.



**Larissa Malone, Ph.D.**, is an Assistant Professor at University of Southern Maine in the Teacher Education Department. Dr. Malone earned a doctorate in Cultural Foundations of Education from the School of Foundations, Leadership, and Administration at Kent State University, a MA from Walsh University, and a BA in International Studies from Case Western Reserve University. Dr. Malone also holds a primary teacher certification from the American Montessori Internationale and taught early childhood and early elementary grades, as well as served as an administrator in a bilingual community-based school, before joining the ranks of higher education. A critical race theorist, Dr. Malone's research centers on the minoritized experience in schooling, inclusive of students, parents, and teachers. She is particularly interested in how the marginalized navigate educational spaces and the intersection of education, race, and tangential disciplines, such as religion, geography, and identity development. Dr. Malone's aim in her research and praxis is towards creating a more equitable world.



My name is **Jill Minot-Seabrook**. I am a native of Portsmouth, NH and presently live in Dover, NH. I am a retired speech and language pathologist with over 30 years of experience working in urban schools and head trauma rehabilitation centers. I have also taught 8th, 7th and 5th grade social studies and science classes and have always made a point of including African Americans' contributions to those topics and others. I co-founded a mentoring program for boys of color in the 1990's called Qualls Academy. In 2017 I co-founded a girls mentoring program for girls of color called Sisters With A Dream, (SWD). Our mission is to improve the academic achievement, self esteem, self awareness and social competence needed to enable the boys and girls to achieve their dreams and to recognize their overall potential in their personal, social and academic lives. In Portsmouth, NH I also serve on the Board of Directors for the Seacoast African American Cultural Center, (SAACC) and volunteer at the Black Heritage Trail of NH.



My name is **Adelaide Solomon-Jordan**. With ancestry in the early eighteenth century Berkshire of Massachusetts, early nineteenth century in Maine as well as ancestry in the British Overseas territories of Bermuda and the Cayman Islands, I research family history and early African American New England history and biography. A native of Connecticut with a Bachelor's in Early Childhood Education and a completed major in history, and a Masters with a focus on African American early New England history and biography. Active as a volunteer on state wide and local community boards and committees, including a three year appointment to the Maine State Archives Advisory Board, Education Chair and board member of the Holocaust and Human Rights Center of Maine, the Portland Public Schools Local Black History Advisory, Portland Friends (Quaker) School Advisory Committee, and the Western Maine Anti-racism Education Advisory (AREA). I reside on the historic street in Rumford Falls, Maine.



**Abbe Levin** is a cultural development consultant. Currently, Abbe is the Cultural Heritage Tourism Contractor for the Maine Office of Tourism. In addition, Abbe works with a wide range of organizations to assist with the preservation, promotion and marketing of cultural resources and assets. She serves on the Abbe Museum Board of Directors, the Maine Downtown Center Advisory Council, the Cultural Alliance of Maine Steering Committee and is a volunteer mentor with the Olympia Snowe Women's Leadership Institute. Abbe is a member of the Leadership Maine Phi Class. Abbe lives in Boothbay with her husband and has two grown sons.



I am **James Ford**, Restorative Practices Coordinator for the Lewiston Public Schools. I received my B.A. from Hobart College, my M.B.A. from UNC Chapel Hill, and my MS.Ed from the University of Southern Maine. I am the former Restorative Practice Coordinator at Lewiston High School and also served as Family and Community Support Coordinator for the district before I moved into my current role. I am an Black male who can trace my lineage to the Middle Passage and an owner of land in Georgia where my ancestors were once slaves. I have lived in Maine for 40 years. I am a former Board member of PROP (Board Chair), Breakwater School, Abyssinian Meeting House (Board Chair), Curtis Memorial Library, and Mid-Coast Hunger Prevention Program and once served on the vestry at St. Paul's Episcopal Church. I am currently a member of the State of Maine's Board of Education.



**Robin Talbot** is the Associate Director of the Stonecoast MFA program. Prior to joining Stonecoast, Robin was the Education and Community Outreach Coordinator for Portland's Center for Cultural Exchange where she organized cultural performances, developed multicultural educational curriculum and maintained ongoing communication with diverse community groups in Greater Portland area. She has worked on two documentary films: A Call to Action: A Community's Dream, which outlines the struggle for civil rights in Maine, and Starting Over; Understanding and Supporting Refugee and Immigrant Experiences. Robin is a Portland Stage Company board trustee and the faculty adviser of the Stonecoast Review.



**Representative Richard A. Evans, M.D.** is serving in his first term in the Maine House. Evans is a decorated veteran of the U.S. Air Force, serving as the Hospital Commander at Whiteman AFB, MO and subsequently being appointed as the Medical Group Commander of the 28th Medical Group, Ellsworth AFB, MO. Dr. Evans is self-employed in the solo private practice of general surgery. He serves on the Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services Committee. Evans attended Howard University in Washington, DC on a scholarship, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Microbiology with a minor in Chemistry, then attended Jefferson Medical College of Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia. Following completion of his residency, he then entered active military duty with his very first assignment being at Loring AFB in Limestone. He is a past President of the Maine Medical Association (MMA) and currently serves as Maine's Senior Delegate to the American Medical Association (AMA).





**Meadow Dibble, Ph.D.** previously served as Director of Community-Engaged Research at the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations in Maine. Meadow is now Project Lead on the Permanent Commission's Place Justice initiative and Executive Director of Atlantic Black Box, a public history project that empowers individuals, community groups, and institutions throughout the place long known as New England to research and begin reckoning with the region's involvement in the slave trade and the global economy of enslavement. Meadow is a Visiting Scholar at Brown University's Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice. She received her Ph.D. from Brown's Department of French and taught Francophone African literature at Colby College from 2005-08.



**Sonya Dunn**, Filmmaker spearheading [James Weldon Johnson documentary project](#).

I am a transmedia storyteller with experience in developing content for traditional, digital, and emerging media platforms. This includes publishing and merchandising. I specialize in transcultural, intercultural, and cross-cultural content and products. As an award-winning filmmaker, media content creator, and creative entrepreneur; I believe in the power of storytelling. I try my best to develop the most innovative and emerging creative/media content and products in the arts, entertainment, digital media, media technology, and broadcasting industries to tell stories.



**Yildiz Yilmaz** is an award winning Production Designer and Producer. She had worked in many well known projects in Nationwide and international. Currently she is working with JEMH productions on a James Weldon Johnson documentary as a producer. "This documentary is a highlight of my career" she says. YILDIZ Yilmaz who is originally from Turkey has resided in Virginia since 1995. She holds a BA from Howard University and MFA from American University. In her free time she enjoys traveling, loves to cook and entertain with family members and friends.



**Tony Allegretti**, Jacksonville Cultural Consultant

I've been consulting, organizing, and advocating for more than two decades. I like to create and build things for clients and they are usually tied to the community and the greater good. Innovative and creative gathering spaces (aka placemaking) and events are fundamental to a great core community. I've founded, implemented, and/or organized **big things** like ArtWalk, the Riverside Arts Market, Spark Artists Grants, large scale Public Art (both publicly and privately funded), International Artist Lecture Series, Paid Arts Internships, International Export Artist Grants, LaVilla Jazz & Heritage Festival and more!



# J.W. Johnson Memorial Proposal

June 3, 2022

Dear Wiscasset Select Board Members,

We are excited to join with you in celebrating Maine's first annual James Weldon Johnson Day on Friday, June 17, 2022.

A Task Force convened by the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations—which includes your Select Board colleagues Terry Heller and Dusty Jones—has designed an exciting and culturally rich [daylong commemoration](#) honoring the life and legacy of this Civil Rights leader, artist, and global citizen who sought respite in Maine and whose extraordinary life ended in this beautiful coastal town.

An important aspect of our commemoration is the James Weldon Johnson memorial project. The proposed site for this memorial is a plot located on the Wiscasset Town Common measuring approximately 20 ft. x 20 ft., situated to the right of the central sidewalk when ascending the hill toward the First Congregational Church.



The approximate location of the proposed site for a James Weldon Johnson Memorial is circled in red above.

With permission from the Select Board, the James Weldon Johnson Task Force proposes to revitalize and beautify this small plot on the Wiscasset Town Common with the aim of creating a serene, inspirational site of memory. Within view of the Wiscasset Library, the County Courthouse, the Congregational Church, and the former Governor's house, there seems no more fitting place in which to honor an exemplary American whose accomplishments in the literary arts, in law, in the realm of faith, and in advancing democracy can be a deep source of pride, not only for Wiscasset and Maine, but for our entire nation.



From left to right, Melanie Edwards, J. W. Johnson's grandniece; Dusty Jones, Select Board member; Representative Rachel Talbot Ross, Chair of the J. W. Johnson Task Force.

At the commemorative ceremony to take place Friday, June 17, 2022 the Task Force plans to gift the Town of Wiscasset with a beautiful and symbolic bench. Handcrafted by Dusty Jones, it incorporates white oak and purple heart wood in homage to the man who co-authored the song "Lift Every Voice and Sing," currently under consideration by the U.S. Congress for designation as our national hymn. This bench is intended as an invitation to residents and visitors alike to find respite at the proposed memorial site, encouraging all to rest and reflect on our country's long journey toward racial justice and then again to stand, renewed in their strength and commitment to march on.





Miniature model of the memorial bench designed by Dusty Jones.

Select Board and Task Force member Terry Heller has proposed that the Town of Wiscasset offer its own contribution to the memorial site by planting a white oak tree in the vicinity of the commemorative bench. The attached quote for \$1,000 includes the cost of the tree and its placement.

Following this year's Observance, the James Weldon Johnson Task Force would like to pursue its collaboration with the Town of Wiscasset to further enhance the site, perhaps adding a small memorial garden. Any further enhancements of this nature would be paid for by fundraising efforts by the Task Force.

We thank you for your consideration and would be pleased to answer any questions about the proposed memorial. It is also our great hope that you will be able to join us in celebrating Maine's first annual James Weldon Johnson Day on June 17<sup>th</sup>.

Sincerely,

[The Members of the James Weldon Johnson Task Force](#)

Contact: Meadow Dibble | 207-530-7421



**Squam Creek Tree Service**  
 141 Post Office Rd.  
 Westport Island, ME 04578  
 (207) 882-6333  
 squamcreektreeservice@gmail.com

**ADDRESS**  
 Terry Heller  
 Town of Wiscasset  
 2 Morton St.  
 Wiscasset, ME 04578

**Estimate 1354**

**DATE 06/01/2022**

DATE	ACTIVITY	DESCRIPTION	AMOUNT
	General Tree Work	Plant White Oak tree on town common	1,000.00

SUBTOTAL	1,000.00
TAX	0.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$1,000.00</b>

Accepted By

Accepted Date

# Letters of Support for H.R. 301

**Rep. Rachel Talbot Ross**  
Co-Chair

**Amb. Maulian Dana,**  
**Penobscot Nation**  
Co-Chair



**Permanent  
Commission**  
**RACIAL, INDIGENOUS  
& TRIBAL POPULATIONS**

February 2, 2022

The Honorable James Clyburn, (D-SC)  
242 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Letter of Support for H.R. 301 – Official National Hymn

Dear Representative Clyburn,

As sponsor of the bill LD 1441, “An Act To Create a James Weldon Johnson Annual Observance Day and an Observance Task Force,” and as Co-Chair of Maine’s Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Tribal Populations, I write this letter to heartily applaud and lend support to your initiative that seeks to inscribe “Lift Every Voice and Sing” as the national hymn of the United States of America.

The Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Tribal Populations is an independent entity with a mission to examine the racial disparities across Maine, and to work toward improving the status and outcomes for historically disadvantaged populations. The Permanent Commission is further empowered by state law to advise and consult all three branches of government.

With the passage of LD 1441 last spring, June 17 will henceforth be recognized as James Weldon Johnson Day in the state of Maine. In addition to the Governor’s annual proclamation, which will acknowledge the honorable life and tremendous contributions of this Civil Rights leader, author, educator, and diplomat, the new law entrusts the Permanent Commission with convening an Observance Task Force.

This group of talented and committed individuals has already begun meeting to develop cultural and educational programming aimed at pursuing Mr. Johnson’s commitment to ending systemic racism. Seeking to connect local and statewide remembrance activities with broader national and international initiatives, the task force will additionally explore every opportunity to memorialize Mr. Johnson’s life and to further his work.

Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations,  
State of Maine  
45 Commerce Drive, Augusta, ME 04330



**Rep. Rachel Talbot Ross**  
Co-Chair

**Amb. Maulian Dana,**  
**Penobscot Nation**  
Co-Chair



**Permanent  
Commission**  
**RACIAL, INDIGENOUS  
& TRIBAL POPULATIONS**

There can be no doubt but that “Lift Every Voice and Sing” deserves a staid place of honor among our national treasures. As a ninth-generation African American Mainer, I can assure you that within my community we have been singing this powerful, healing hymn for as long as I can remember, finding solace and spiritual replenishment as we return time and again to this eternal source of lift.

With deep gratitude for your decades of enlightened public service, please count me among the fervent supporters of H.R. 301.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rachel Talbot Ross".

Rachel Talbot Ross  
Assistant Majority Leader, Maine House of Representatives  
Co-Chair of the Permanent Commission on the Status of  
Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations

# Letter from Leon Russell, NAACP




## NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE

4805 MT. HOPE DRIVE • BALTIMORE, MARYLAND 21215-3297 • (410) 580-5777

**LEON W. RUSSELL**

*Chairman, National Board of Directors*

TO: The Town of Wiscasset, the Board of Selectmen and Residents

FROM: Leon W. Russell, Chair   
NAACP National Board of Directors

SUBJECT: Congratulations and Thank You

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, I extend sincere thanks to all of you for honoring James Weldon Johnson, the third Executive Secretary of the NAACP and first American of African descent to hold the position.

Your decision to recognize a true pioneer of the civil rights movement is timely and important. First the simple willingness to place a plaque at the sight of Johnson's tragic death speaks volumes. Johnson was a tourist, who came to your community to enjoy a vacation a respite from his work as an Author, a Professor and a playwright. Your recognition in addition to recognizing the historic contributions to Civil Rights and his thirteen years as an employee of what would become the nations oldest and most successful social justice organization would be significant at any point. The fact that you do so in 2021 is even more significant, given the nations fractious dialogue with respect to the study of the history of the African's experience in the United States. Johnson's ten years of service as Executive Secretary saw him raise the issue of Lynching to the highest legislative levels. Though unsuccessful, that fight allowed him to speak to the myriad ways that the Black Community was marginalized and relegated to second class status.

Ultimately, James Weldon Johnson and his brother J. Rosamond Johnson are most famously none for penning the NAACP National Hymn; Lift Every Voice and Sing. The song meant to celebrate Abraham Lincoln's 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday in 1900 has become a true anthem representing the 400 year struggle of their people.

On behalf of the NAACP we thank you for recognizing this modern hero. Even in death he continues to lead. Your recognition says that Wiscasset is a leader as well.

Thank you. Have a wonderful celebration.

Yours in the struggle.

Leon W. Russell

[www.naacp.org](http://www.naacp.org)



## Press for James Weldon Johnson

Voters may get Johnson plaque question	<a href="#">Link</a>	Wiscasset Newspaper	By Susan Johns	May 5, 2021
Things to cheer about: Do you agree?	<a href="#">Link</a>	Wiscasset Newspaper	By Susan Johns	October 20, 2021
James Weldon Johnson event Saturday at WCC	<a href="#">Link</a>	Wiscasset Newspaper	By Meadow Dibble	October 19, 2021
Memorial to 'Lift Ev'ry Voice' Lyricist to be Discussed at Wiscasset Event	<a href="#">Link</a>	Lincoln County News	By Nate Poole	October 21, 2021 at 2:17 pm
'Lo and behold': State, locals, Floridians honor James Weldon Johnson in Wiscasset	<a href="#">Link</a>	Wiscasset Newspaper	By Susan Johns	October 25, 2021
Maine State Archives Shares Railroad Accident Report of the Death of Civil Rights Leader James Weldon Johnson	<a href="#">Link</a>	<a href="http://Maine.gov">Maine.gov</a>	By Secretary of State	November 15, 2021
Documents detail James Weldon Johnson's death at Wiscasset RR tracks	<a href="#">Link</a>	Wiscasset Newspaper	By Susan Johns	December 13, 2021
Wiscasset, state talk James Weldon Johnson	<a href="#">Link</a>	Wiscasset Newspaper	By Susan Johns	December 28, 2021
From Lewiston Sun Journal: Memorial to Black poet, civil rights activist may come to Wiscasset	<a href="#">Link</a>	Sun Journal	By Kathleen O'Brien	February 24, 2022
James Weldon Johnson Celebration Set for Wiscasset	<a href="#">Link</a>	Central Maine		June 10, 2022
Town talks would be sewer rate hikes; board accepts bench to honor James Weldon Johnson	<a href="#">Link</a>	Wiscasset Newspaper	By Susan Johns	June 8, 2022
Selectman-made bench may help memorialize Johnson at town common	<a href="#">Link</a>	Wiscasset Newspaper	By Susan Johns	June 7, 2022
Maine celebrates James Weldon Johnson Day in Wiscasset	<a href="#">Link</a>	Wiscasset Newspaper	By Susan Johns	June 19, 2022

## Resources for Book Discussions on James Weldon Johnson

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man Reader's Guide

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/296474/the-autobiography-of-an-ex-colored-man-by-james-weldon-johnson/readers-guide/>

Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man Discussion Questions

<http://l-adam-mekler.com/jwjqs.htm>

A Study Guide for James Weldon Johnson's "The Creation" (Poetry for Students)

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B01LO3IA12/ref=dp-kindle>

A Study Guide for James Weldon Johnson's the Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man

<https://www.amazon.com/Weldon-Johnsons-Autobiography-Ex-Coloured-Students-ebook/dp/B01HQWJTVO/>