



## Department of the Secretary of State

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### JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION

#### **L.D. 243, “Resolve, to Name a Railroad Crossing in Wiscasset the James Weldon Johnson Crossing”**

Testimony of Shenna Bellows, Secretary of State and  
Kate McBrien, Chief Deputy Secretary of State,  
Department of the Secretary of State

Tuesday, March 4, 2025

Senator Nangle, Representative Crafts, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation; I am pleased to provide testimony in support of LD 243, a “Resolve, the Name a Railroad Crossing in Wiscasset the James Weldon Johnson Crossing”.

Most of us can picture the intersection of Route 1 and the railroad tracks in Wiscasset, just before the bridge as you head north. It can be difficult to imagine that a hundred years ago, that bridge was nestled tightly on both sides by buildings and busy docks where cargo was transferred between ships and trucks and a very active rail line.

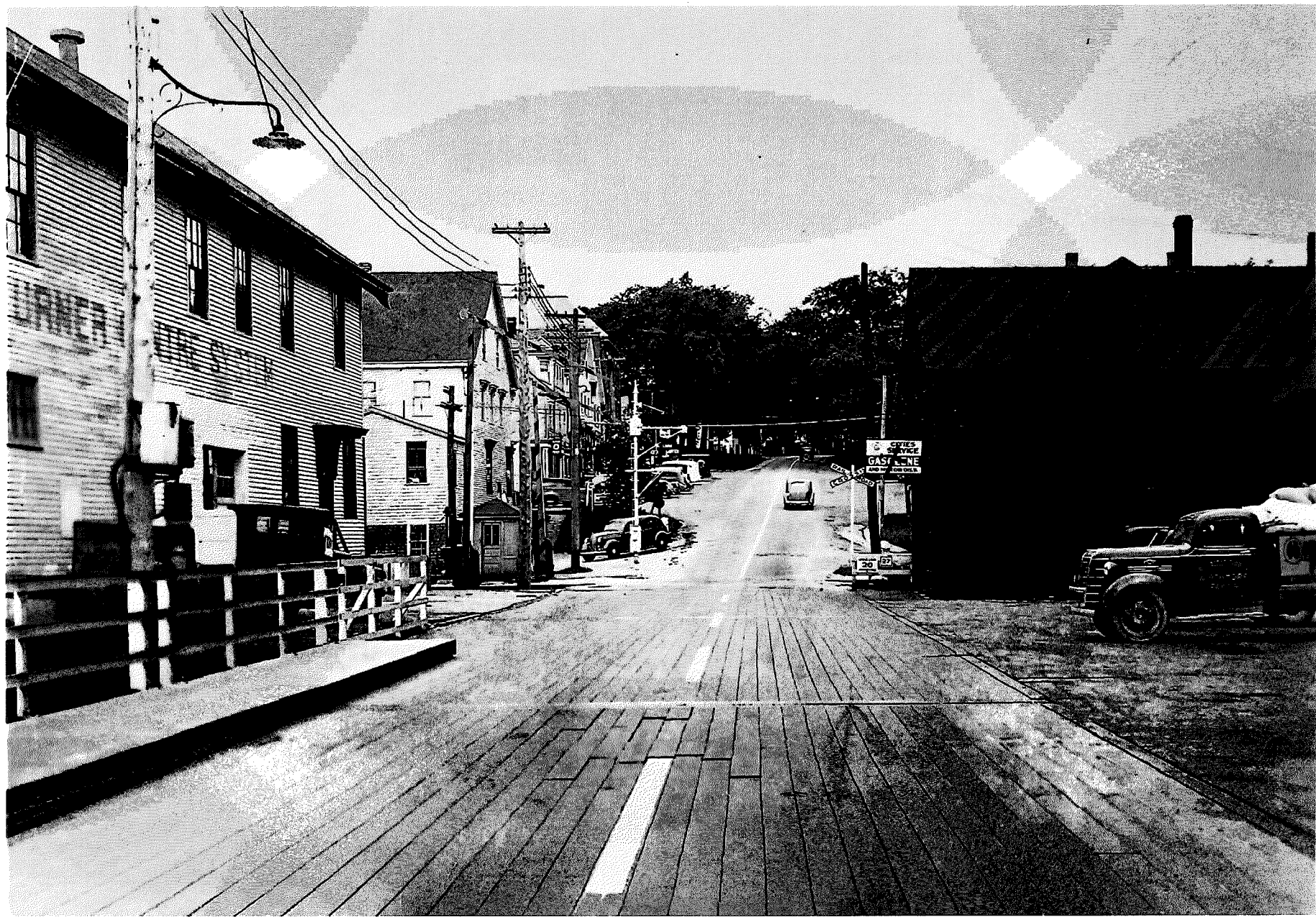
In the early morning of June 26, 1938 on a very rainy day, Grace and James Weldon Johnson traveled south on Route 1, heading home after visiting friends in the mid-coast. In the poor visibility, the Johnson’s car collided with a Maine Central Railroad locomotive. The car was crushed, Grace Johnson was severely injured, and her husband, James Weldon Johnson, was killed. The Maine State Archives holds the Railroad Accident investigation report.

James Weldon Johnson was born in Florida and in 1897 was the first African American admitted to the Florida Bar Exam. Shortly thereafter, he and his brother moved to New York City where he worked in journalism and education. In 1904, Johnson assisted Teddy Roosevelt’s presidential campaign, and the successful President Roosevelt appointed him consul to first Venezuela, and then Nicaragua. He served as the President of the Colored Republican Club and in 1916 started working as an organizer for the fledgling NAACP, engaging the New York chapters in mass demonstrations opposing Jim Crow laws and lynchings. In 1920, Johnson became the first Executive Secretary (CEO) of the NAACP and served in that capacity for a decade. In 1934, he became the first African American professor at New York University.

Johnson was a writer and a poet and a social leader throughout the Harlem Renaissance. He most famously wrote the poem, "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," which his brother, a composer, set to music and is now commonly referred to as the Black National Anthem.

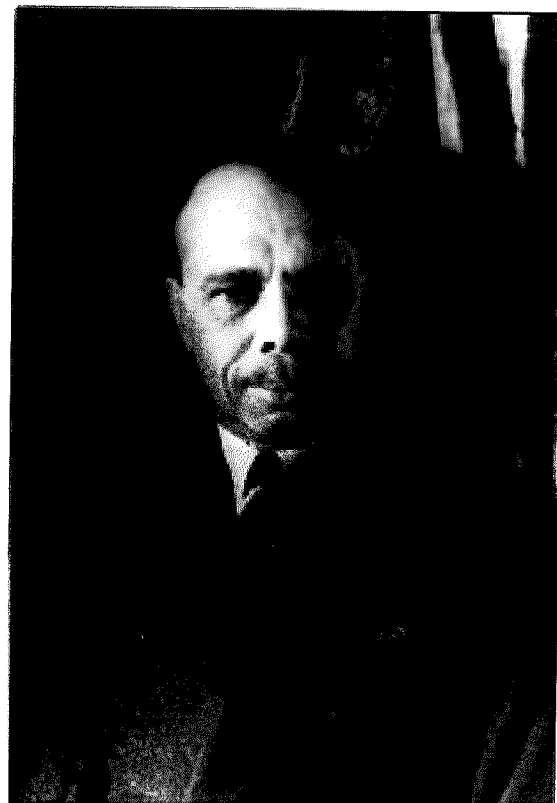
In 2022, a task force of state and Wiscasset community members organized the first James Weldon Johnson Day. That day honored the legacy of Mr. Johnson and shared the power of poetry. The community also dedicated a bench to Johnson, which currently sits on the common alongside Route 1 and overlooks the location of his tragic death.

Given Johnson's accomplishments in the civil rights movement, in the academy, in the diplomatic corps, and in the humanities, we support the effort to formally name this railroad crossing the "James Weldon Johnson Crossing". This concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer questions.





Portrait of Grace Nail  
Johnson



Portrait of James Weldon  
Johnson

