

Heather Jones

Wiscasset

LD 243

My name is Heather Jones. I am a resident of Wiscasset and former member of the Wiscasset Select Board. I wish to thank the Transportation Committee for its consideration of this request to name the Route 1 railroad crossing in honor of James Weldon Johnson. I served on the work group to develop the memorial to Mr. Johnson, and would like to address some of the concerns that have been raised since the town was presented with this idea.

First, to the notion that it would create two memorials in town for Mr. Johnson, I would like to offer some background. When we created the memorial, our desire was to place it at the railroad crossing as that spot is sacred to people who are familiar with Mr. Johnson and his legacy, but the site by the railroad crossing was not an option three years ago, so the bench was placed up the hill on the Town Common looking toward the crossing.

I am very grateful to the town that the bench has remained there for nearly three years, but I have always considered the work unfinished without there also being some small marker at the site of his death. People visit that site and take pictures of it even without a marker there. Naming the railroad crossing in honor of Mr. Johnson would result in a modest sign being placed at the location with his name on it which would suffice for this purpose.

I also want to address the concern that Mr. Johnson had no association with Wiscasset and only died when he happened to be passing through on vacation. To that I would first recall that Wiscasset is America. Some key moments of American history, and much of what we are as a nation, happened here or began here.

In 1938, traveling for a Black person or a Black family was dangerous. That's something many people don't know or remember about our history, but part of Mr. Johnson's work was to exercise his rights as a free American, so that others would be encouraged and emboldened to do so. He would go places and do things that were his right to do even if he faced resistance for it, and traveling was one of those things. By traveling here, he was engaging in his unique and pioneering form of activism.

One of the dangers for Black families traveling was if they were injured, such as in a car accident. In those days, it was difficult for Black people away from home to find hospitals or clinics that would serve them. When Mr. Johnson died in Wiscasset, his wife,

Grace Nail Johnson was horribly injured and spent three months in Damariscotta receiving care and treatment for her injuries, until she recovered enough to go home. That is something that would not have happened in many places in America at that time, and I consider it a very special part of this story. It speaks to the goodness and humanity of the people of Maine.

Lastly, to the concern that there are other people associated with our town deserving of recognition. This is true, and one thing I learned when I participated in the work to create this memorial is what it takes to do such a thing, and that is a group of people who desire to do it and undertake the work to get it done. There are a few other notables I have found in my own research that are as yet unrecognized, and I will note that erecting a memorial to one person does not preclude honoring others. In fact, we have many such sites in our town.

On March 5th, after a robust public discussion, the Wiscasset Select Board voted to support the initiative to name the railroad crossing for James Weldon Johnson. This included plans to move the bench to the crossing to a landscaped area in a little spot of grass by the river, a place where people could stand or sit and contemplate his legacy. I think this a beautiful and elegant solution, and a wonderful way to finish this important work.

Respectfully,

Heather Jones