

# Primary Source

“Lift Every Voice and Sing” (Black National Anthem)  
by James Weldon Johnson, 1900



To what extent did Founding principles of liberty, equality, and justice become a reality for African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century?

- I can interpret primary sources related to Founding principles of liberty, equality, and justice in the first half of the twentieth century.
- I can explain how laws and policy, courts, and individuals and groups contributed to or pushed back against the quest for liberty, equality, and justice for African Americans.
- I can create an argument using evidence from primary sources.
- I can analyze issues in history to help find solutions to present-day challenges.

## Building Context

James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) was an educator, writer, composer, diplomat, and civil rights activist in the Black American community. In 1900, James and his brother John Rosamond were asked to write a song in honor of Abraham Lincoln's birthday. “Lift Every Voice and Sing” began as a poem that John Rosamond set to music, and it was performed by a choir of schoolchildren. The song became synonymous with Black Americans’ fight for equality and justice and is today referred to as the Black National Anthem.

## The Black National Anthem

Source: <https://www.blackpast.org/black-past-features/black-national-anthem/>

Lift every voice and sing  
Till earth and heaven ring,  
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;  
Let our rejoicing rise  
High as the listening 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 till 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,  
Till 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.

*Notes*

## Comprehension and Analysis Questions

1. How do the lyrics refer to the past? The present? The future?

2. Summarize the message of this song in your own words.

3. Why do you think this song is referred to as the Black National Anthem?