



Lesson

# Augusta Savage: Shaping a Future for Black Artists

Hope Feher

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Subject Area	Grade Level	Time
Elementary History & Social Studies	Grade 5	90 Minutes

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## Description

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James Weldon Johnson's poem set to music is often referred to as the "Black National Anthem." It has inspired many artists including Augusta Savage whose similarly titled sculpture, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" also known as "The Harp," was commissioned for the 1939's world fair. Augusta Savage's life and work would reflect not only the economic hardship of the Great Depression but also the growing movement towards civil rights.

She would become a significant influence for other African American Artists to excel during the Harlem Renaissance. Sadly the legacy of work has been largely lost or destroyed further augmenting the inequality and obstacles many black Americans have faced. Students will dive deeply into the meaning of Augusta Savage's work and her influences.

## Lesson Objective

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- Students will be able to sequence significant events in the life and work of Augusta Savage.
- Students will be able to critique Augusta Savage's sculpture "Lift Every Voice and Sing" also known as "The Harp" using the Edmund Feldman's art criticism model: Describe, Analyze, Interpret, and Decide.
- Students will be able to identify elements in Augusta's work that are influenced by the work of James Weldon Johnson's poem and music of John Rosamond Johnson.
- Students will be able to identify the significance of Augusta's life and work as it relates to the larger context of the Harlem Renaissance, Great Depression, and rise of the Civil Rights Movement.

## Big Idea

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How does Augusta Savage's commissioned work for the 1939 World's Fair reflect the economic hardship of the Great Depression and symbolize the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement?

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## C3 Framework Standards Addressed

**D2.His.14.3—5.** Explain probable causes and effects of events and developments.

**D2.His.1.3—5.** Create and use a chronological sequence of related events to compare developments that happened at the same time.

**D2.His.11.3—5.** Infer the intended audience and purpose of a historical source from information within the source itself.

**D2.His.6.3—5.** Describe how people’s perspectives shaped the historical sources they created.

## Materials & Resources

### Library of Congress

[Primary Source Analysis Tool](#)

### Library of Congress

[Teacher’s Guide: Analyzing Sound Recordings](#) | [Teacher Resources](#)

Paper & Pencil

Audio of *Lift Every Voice and Sing*

**Timeline:** [Photographs and Dates of Augusta Savage’s Life and Historical Events](#)

Copies [the Lyrics](#) and [Sheet Music](#) to *Lift Every Voice and Sing* and [Photographs of the Sculpture, \*The Harp\*](#)

## Essential Vocabulary

### Commissioned

Ordered to be made in exchange for payment

### The Great Depression

Worldwide economic downturn that began in 1929 and lasted until about 1939. It was the longest and most severe depression ever experienced by the industrialized Western world, sparking fundamental changes in economic institutions, macroeconomic policy, and economic theory.

### Harlem Renaissance

A blossoming (c. 1918–37) of African American culture, particularly in the creative arts, and the most influential movement in African American literary history.

### Civil Rights Movement

Mass protest movement against racial segregation and discrimination in the southern United States that came to national prominence during the mid-1950s.

### Sculpture

A three-dimensional work of art (such as a statue).

### Bronze

An alloy of copper and tin, and sometimes other elements.

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## PROCEDURES

### Warm Up

Distribute photographs depicting important events in Augusta's life and corresponding note cards with information about her life and concurrent world events. Have students find their partner by matching dates and arrange students sequentially to present their information to the class. Once all students have presented, ask the group to sort their events into the categories of Life/ Culture/ and Money. **Ask the following guided questions:**

1. Where and when did Augusta experience obstacles in her life and work?
2. Which category Life/Culture/ or Money affected her the most?
3. How did she help other black artists? Why is she an important female artist to learn about?

### Augusta Savage Life & Work Timeline



Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. "Augusta Savage, artist." *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1930–1939. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/57a5a560-c5f2-012f-2355-58d385a7bc34>

*Display the timeline somewhere in your classroom so that students can reference the life and work of Augusta Savage throughout the lesson.*

#### 1892

Born on February 29 in Green Cove Springs, Florida.

#### 1907–1919

Moves to West Palm Beach; begins formal training and teaching art.

Marries and later becomes widowed; continues pursuing art while raising her daughter.

#### 1921–1923

Moves to New York City during the early years of the Harlem Renaissance. Harlem Renaissance a blossoming (c. 1918–37) of African American culture, particularly in the creative arts, and the most influential movement in African American literary history.

She is accepted to Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art; tuition is waived due to her talent.

# Augusta Savage: Shaping a Future

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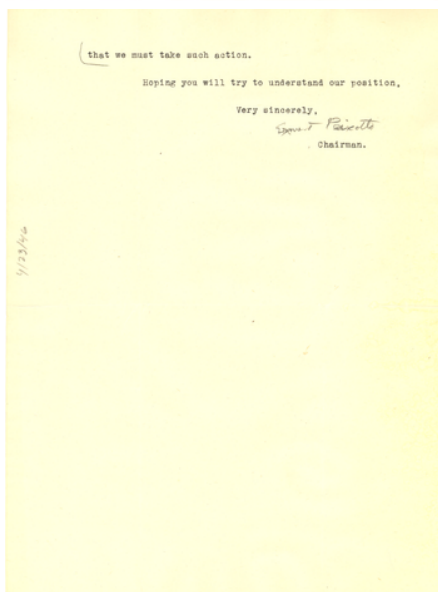
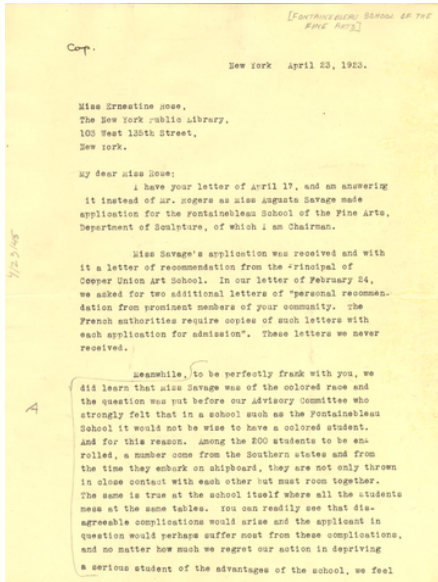
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## Augusta Savage Life & Work Timeline

Display the timeline somewhere in your classroom so that students can reference the life and work of Augusta Savage throughout the lesson.



### 1925

Selected for a summer art program in France, but funding is withdrawn after objections to a Black woman attending. Savage speaks out publicly against the decision, drawing national attention to racial discrimination in arts funding, stating that the rejection was not about merit but race.

### 1929

Wins a Julius Rosenwald Fund fellowship, allowing her to study in Paris.

### 1930

The Great Depression begins.

### The Great Depression

The worldwide economic downturn that began in 1929 and lasted until about 1939. It was the longest and most severe depression ever experienced by the industrialized Western world, sparking fundamental changes in economic institutions, macroeconomic policy, and economic theory.

Peixotto, Ernest, 1869–1940. Letter from Ernest Peixotto to Ernestine Rose, April 23, 1923. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

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# Augusta Savage: Shaping a Future

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## Augusta Savage Life & Work Timeline

*Display the timeline somewhere in your classroom so that students can reference the life and work of Augusta Savage throughout the lesson.*



### 1930–1931

Studies sculpture in France; exhibits internationally and gains critical recognition.

### 1931

Savage struggles financially as private patronage collapses during the Depression; she often lacks money for materials and studio space. She returns to the United States.

### 1934–1935

Becomes the first Black member of the National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors. Helps organize and exhibit in the Salon of Contemporary Negro Art in New York City.

The Salon provides a rare professional exhibition space for Black artists who were routinely excluded from white-run galleries and museums.

### 1935

Founds the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts in Harlem, providing affordable art education to young Black artists during the Depression.

#### Top

Passport photograph of sculptor Augusta Savage, date stamped August 25, 1931.

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. "[Passport photograph of sculptor Augusta Savage, date stamped August 25, 1931](https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/10fba40-b4fe-0130-7a62-58d385a7bbd0)" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1931.

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/10fba40-b4fe-0130-7a62-58d385a7bbd0>

#### Bottom

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Art and Artifacts Division, The New York Public Library. "[Gamin](https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/2dcfc7b0-c6f4-012f-5420-58d385a7bc34)" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1929.

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/2dcfc7b0-c6f4-012f-5420-58d385a7bc34>

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## Augusta Savage Life & Work Timeline

### Right

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. "[Works Progress Administration instructors from the Harlem Community Art Center.](https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/dc19cf80-c61f-012f-b483-58d385a7bc34)" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1930–1935. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/dc19cf80-c61f-012f-b483-58d385a7bc34>

### Below

*Augusta Savage presenting model to Grover Whalen.*

Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library. "[Art — Sculpture — Harp \(Augusta Savage\) — Augusta Savage presenting model to Grover Whalen](https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/8f934f30-c537-012f-e121-58d385a7bc34)" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1935–1945. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/8f934f30-c537-012f-e121-58d385a7bc34>

*Display the timeline somewhere in your classroom so that students can reference the life and work of Augusta Savage throughout the lesson.*



### 1936

Appointed director of the Harlem Community Art Center, funded by the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

Mentors artists such as Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, and Gwendolyn Knight.

### 1937–1939

Creates her most famous work, *Lift Every Voice and Sing* (also known as *The Harp*), for the 1939 New York World's Fair.

Despite its popularity, she is not paid enough to cast the sculpture in bronze; the original plaster work is destroyed after the fair due to lack of funds for preservation.

# Augusta Savage: Shaping a Future

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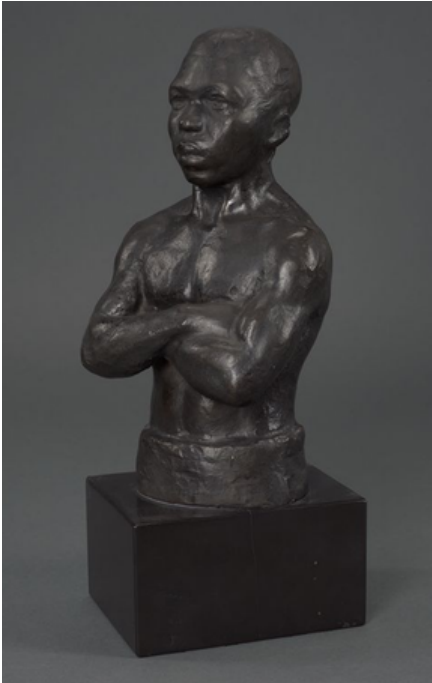
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## Augusta Savage Life & Work Timeline

*Display the timeline somewhere in your classroom so that students can reference the life and work of Augusta Savage throughout the lesson.*



Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Art and Artifacts Division, The New York Public Library. "The Pugilist" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1942. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/5b6ee300-10e6-0136-f863-095b7a95bb3f>

### **1940s–1950s** (Context)

The Civil Rights Movement begins.

### **Civil Rights Movement**

Mass protest movement against racial segregation and discrimination in the southern United States that came to national prominence during the mid-1950s.

Many of Savage's works are lost or destroyed because she cannot afford proper storage or casting.

**1954–1962** Lives quietly in New York while the modern Civil Rights Movement gains momentum nationwide.

She dies on March 27 in New York City.

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## Guided Practice

*Take a closer look at Augusta Savage's art.*

*Lift Every Voice and Sing*, also known as *The Harp*, was commissioned for the 1939 World's Fair in New York and it took over a year for Augusta to complete. Display or project a copy of Augusta's sculpture for the whole class to see. Explain that the sculpture *Lift Every Voice and Sing* was heavily inspired by James Weldon Johnson's poem of the same name with music from James Weldon Johnson. It is largely considered the Black National Anthem.

Listen to this piece of music (Available for free on platforms such as spotify and youtube).

**Ask students to sketch or write on paper as they listen.**

After listening, have students to pair up to fill out the [Primary Source Analysis Tool](#) while asking guiding questions from the Library of Congress' Teacher Resources, [Teacher's Guide: Analyzing Sound Recordings](#).

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*Distribute individual copies of Augusta's sculpture for students to reference.*

*As a class group critique the work using Edmund Feldman's art criticism model.*

### Describe

1. What do you see?
2. What does it remind you of?
3. How has the artist arranged it and what materials have they used?
4. What shapes, colors, textures, and lines do you see?

### Analyze

1. Why has the artist placed these forms together so similarly?
2. What feeling does this create?
3. How else has the artist shown principles of unity, rhythm, and balance?

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## GUIDED PRACTICE CONT.

*Distribute individual copies of Augusta's sculpture for students to reference.*

*As a class group critique the work using Edmund Feldman's art criticism model.*

## Interpret

1. Who do these figures represent?
2. How is the figure in the front significantly different?
3. What is the importance of the hand in the work?
4. Consider when this piece was made and who would see it?

Now reveal *Fig. 3 and 4* of Augusta working on the piece. Explain that the piece is over 16 feet tall.

1. How does the size, proportion, and scale add to its meaning?

## Decide

This piece was renamed by fair officials to be called *The Harp* rather than, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*.

1. What are the implications of this?
2. Which title do you prefer and why?

Have students vote on their preferred title and explain their reasoning. Tally students' votes using a T-chart.

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## Independent Practice

*Figures 5–9*

Now consider how both James Weldon Johnson and Augusta Savage's work are related. In pairs or small groups, distribute sample lyrics of "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

Ask each group to find evidence of meaning in Augusta's sculpture design. For example, the lyrics "Lift every voice and sing 'Till earth and heaven ring, Ring with the harmonies of Liberty" is reflected in the long robes of the tall figures in Savage's work that resemble gospel singers.

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## Summarizer

### Watch

[Doc Chat Episode 36: Augusta Savage's "Lift Every Voice and Sing," A Treasure of Liberation from The New York Public Library on Vimeo.](#)

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## Exit Ticket

Augusta Savage said, "The job I try to do for my people is to open doors for them." What evidence from her life and work supports this?

## FURTHER RESEARCH & RESOURCES

### Modification & Accomodation

For younger audiences or time constraints, you can read "In her hands" by Alan Schroeder as your introduction rather than completing the living timeline.

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### Extension & Enrichment Activities

1. Listen to Beyonce's recent rendition of *Lift Every Voice and Sing* during her historic performance as the first Black woman to headline Coachella. How is this piece still significant today?
2. Have students create their own 3D clay designs inspired by their favorite piece of music or ask them to design a modern version of Augusta's artwork.
3. Evaluate the following quote by Augusta: "*I don't see color in art. I only see art. Art is too great to be limited by color.*"
4. Have students design a postcard from the world's fair. In their written letter, they should describe seeing Augusta Savage's work for the first time on display.

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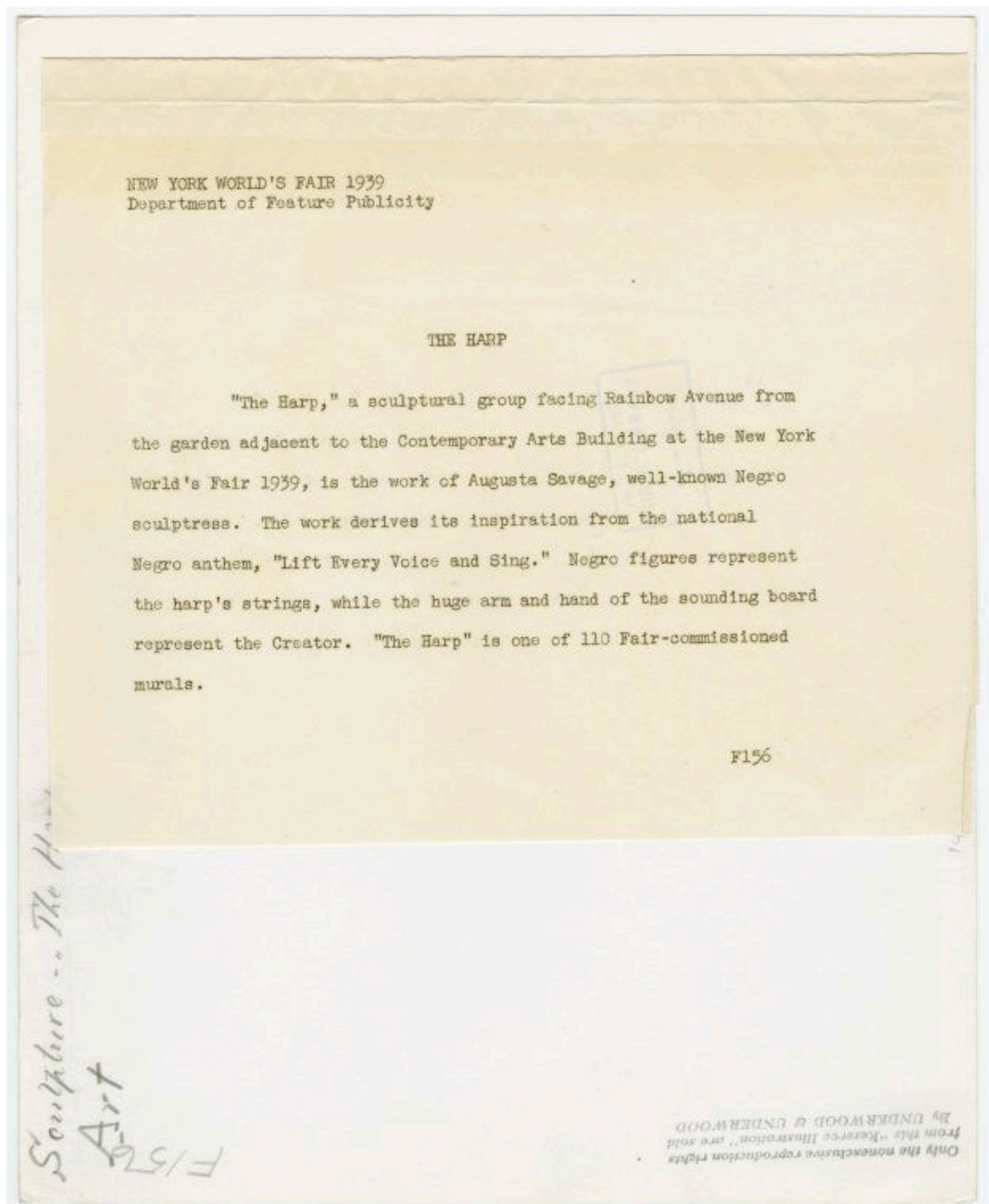
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## Supporting Images

Figure 1



Figures 1 and 2

*Augusta Savage's Lift Every Voice and Sing*

Manuscripts and Archives Division,  
The New York Public Library. "[Art = Sculpture - Harp \(Augusta Savage\) = Harp](#)" *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*. 1939.  
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/901504e0-c537-012f-7513-58d385a7bc34>

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## Supporting Images

Figure 2



Figures 1 and 2

*Augusta Savage's Lift Every Voice and Sing*

Manuscripts and Archives Division,  
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# Augusta Savage: Shaping a Future

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## Supporting Images

Figure 4



Figures 3 and 4

Manuscripts and Archives Division,  
The New York Public Library. "[Art =  
Sculpture — Harp \(Augusta Savage\)  
Harp](#)" The New York Public Library  
Digital Collections. 1935–1945.  
[https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/  
s/917d2320-c537-012f-7926-  
58d385a7bc34](https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/917d2320-c537-012f-7926-58d385a7bc34)

## Supporting Images

### Figure 5

*A group of young men in Jacksonville, Florida, arranged to celebrate Lincoln's birthday in 1900. My brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, and I decided to write a song to be sung at the exercises. I wrote the words and he wrote the music. Our New York publisher, Edward B. Marks, made mimeographed copies for us, and the song was taught to and sung by a chorus of five hundred colored school children.*

*Shortly afterwards my brother and I moved away from Jacksonville to New York, and the song passed out of our minds. But the school children of Jacksonville kept singing it; they went off to other schools and sang it; they became teachers and taught it to other children. Within twenty years it was being sung over the South and in some other parts of the country. Today the song, popularly known as the Negro National Hymn, is quite generally used. The lines of this song repay me in an elation, almost of exquisite anguish, whenever I hear them sung by Negro children.*

## LIFT EVERY VOICE & SING James Weldon Johnson

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 hast brought us thus far on the way;  
Thou who hast 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.

Copyright Credit: James Weldon Johnson, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" from James Weldon Johnson: Complete Poems, ed. Sondra Kathryn Wilson (New York: Penguin Books, 2000).  
Source: James Weldon Johnson: Complete Poems (Penguin Books, 2000)  
Source: [Lift Every Voice and Sing](#), | [The Poetry Foundation](#)

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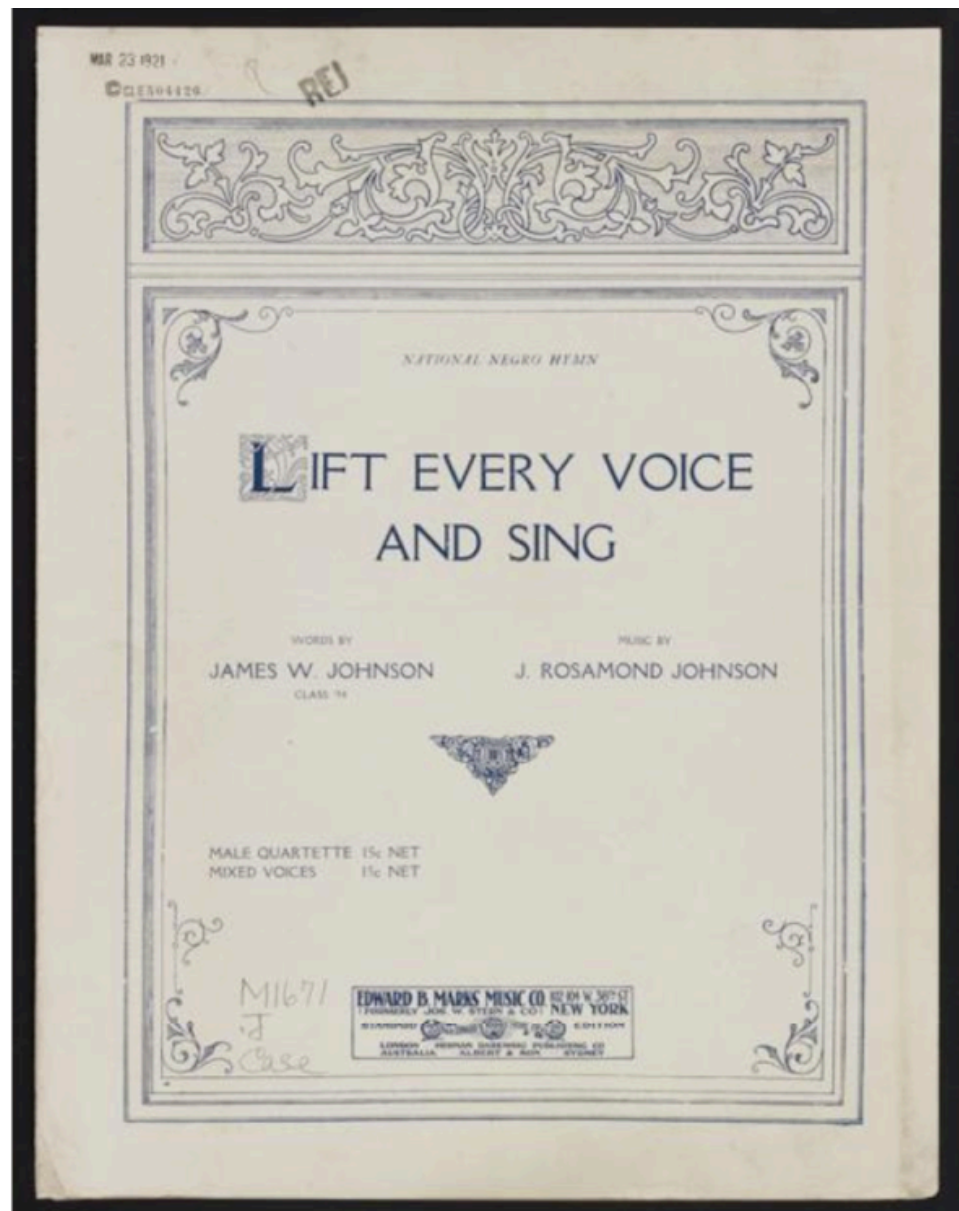
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## Supporting Images

Figure 6



Figures 6–9

Johnson, J. Rosamond, and James Weldon Johnson. Lift Every Voice and Sing. New York: E.B. Marks Music Co, 1921. Notated Music. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, [www.loc.gov/item/89751755](http://www.loc.gov/item/89751755).

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## Supporting Images

Figure 7

3

Lift Every Voice and Sing

Words by  
JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

Music by  
J. ROSAMOND JOHNSON

Moderato e maestoso

vk18 4/13/09

Lift ev - 'ry voice and  
Ston - y the road we  
God of our wea - ry

sing, Till earth and hea - ven ring, Ring with the har - mo - nies of  
trod, Bit - ter the chast - 'ning rod, Felt in the days when hope un -  
years, God of our si - lent tears, Thou who hast brought us thus far

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Figures 6–9

Johnson, J. Rosamond, and James Weldon Johnson. Lift Every Voice and Sing. New York: E.B. Marks Music Co, 1921. Notated Music. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, [www.loc.gov/item/89751755](http://www.loc.gov/item/89751755).

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## Supporting Images

Figure 8

4

Lib - er - ty; Let our re - joic - ing rise High as the  
born - had died; Yet with a stead - y beat, Have not our  
on - the way; Thou who hast by Thy might, Led us in -

list - 'ning skies, Let it re - sound loud as the roll - ing sea...  
wear - y - feet Come to the place for which our fa - thers sighed?  
to the - light, Keep us for - ev - er in the path, - we pray.

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us  
We have come ov - er a - way that with tears has been wa - tered  
Lest our feet stray from the pla - ces, our God, where we met Thee,

8979-3

Figures 6–9

Johnson, J. Rosamond, and James Weldon Johnson. Lift Every Voice and Sing. New York: E.B. Marks Music Co, 1921. Notated Music. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, [www.loc.gov/item/89751755](http://www.loc.gov/item/89751755).

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## Supporting Images

Figure 9

5

*rall. e molto cresc.* *allargando*

Sing a song full of the hope that the pres-ent has brought—  
We have come, tread-ing our path thro' the blood of the slaugh -  
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we for - get—

*mp* *sfz* *rall. e molto cresc.* *allargando*

*ff a tempo*

us; Fac - ing the ris - ing sun of our new day be -  
tered, Out from the gloom - y past, Till now we stand at  
Thee; Shad-owed be - neath Thy hand, May we for - ev - er

*ff* *tremolo* *ffz*

gun, Let us march on till vic - to - ry — is won.  
last Where the white gleam of our bright star — is cast.  
stand, True to our God, True to our na - tive land.

8979 - 3

Figures 6–9

Johnson, J. Rosamond, and James Weldon Johnson. Lift Every Voice and Sing. New York: E.B. Marks Music Co, 1921. Notated Music. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, [www.loc.gov/item/89751755](http://www.loc.gov/item/89751755).