

**JAMES WELDON JOHNSON**  
FOUNDATION

October 2023

PROGRESS REPORT

Submitted by  
James Weldon Johnson Foundation  
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**Project Name**

Rehabilitation of Historic James Weldon Johnson Writing Cabin & James Weldon Johnson Foundation Programming

**Outcomes and Impact**

The James Weldon Johnson Writing Cabin preservation's Phase I bricks-and-mortar work started in October 2022, repairing the building envelope and exterior only (foundation, chimney, roof, exterior walls, windows, entry door). The James Weldon Johnson Foundation and contractor Kronenberger & Sons Restoration completed the Phase I Rehabilitation of the Historic James Weldon Johnson Writing Cabin project in late January 2023. .

**Outcome**

The James Weldon Johnson Foundation completed an exterior Writing Cabin stabilization plan in January 2023. Current visitations to the Writing Cabin resumed in October - November 2022 with limited site visits. Completing the rehabilitation plan protects the site, allowing more access to artists, students, and tourists.

- (1) Fieldstone masonry repairs to chimney and foundation (Complete)
- (2) Repairs to wooden slab siding and trim (Complete)
- (3) Replacement of cedar shake roof and copper flashing (Complete)
- (4) Restored or recreated windows (Complete)

The James Weldon Johnson Foundation's mission is to advance the legacy of James Weldon Johnson through educational, intellectual, and artistic works that impact the contemporary world and exemplify Johnson's enduring contributions to American history and worldwide culture. This vision is being realized by preserving and rehabilitating "Five Acres" as a destination for artist residencies, educational convening, and preserving Black history and achievement.

The Writing Cabin is located at "Five Acres," the former summer cottage of Grace Nail and James Weldon Johnson in Great Barrington, MA. Five Acres was recommended for listing in the National Register of Historic Places by the Massachusetts Historical Commission and Great Barrington Historical Commission in 2017. James Weldon Johnson used this two-room, 220-square-foot cabin as a writing studio during his stays at his country house in Great Barrington, MA. The studio was the place of creation of many of Johnson's works, including his masterpiece *God's Trombones* and autobiography, *Along This Way*. It provided a refuge for reflection and creativity and a source of inspiration.

## **Impact**

In April 2022, our application to the Massachusetts Historic Preservation Matching Grant program in partnership with The 1772 Foundation for work on the James Weldon Johnson Writing Cabin was approved. In the post-pandemic period, out of 64 letters of inquiry with only \$125,000 to grant, we were one of 16 organizations recommended for funding that represented a variety of projects from across Massachusetts.

## **National Support and Mellon Foundation**

James Weldon Johnson Foundation secured a national funding partner in 2022--a \$101,000 grant award, including \$96,000 for "bricks and mortar" work and \$5,000 for architecture and engineering fees, from the National Trust for Historic Preservation's African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund. Following that, the NFL Foundation contributed an additional \$25,000 to help complete the James Weldon Johnson Writing Cabin preservation's Phase I bricks-and-mortar work and to support fellowship and artist residency programming.

As a result of our readiness and ability to complete the Phase I writing cabin project, the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund referred the James Weldon Johnson Foundation to Mellon Foundation's Humanities In Place program. Mellon Foundation has invited the James Weldon Johnson Foundation to submit a "Concept Note" in September 2023 for 2024 funding to outline our ideas for a potential project. This Mellon Concept Note--a \$1,475,800 ask--is not a formal proposal, and an invitation for one may not finally be forthcoming. Mellon signaled that they will not fund residencies and public programming, but

they may propose support for restoration (Phase 2 Interior work) and accessibility and preservation planning.

## **Programming**

### Community Engagement

Massachusetts State Representative Smitty Pignatelli (4th Berkshire District), on October 25, 2022, toured and observed the early process of immaculately cleaning, picking, vacuuming, re-mortar and lifting the foundation to protect it from a negative pitch. Rep. Pignatelli asked, "How far back can you get this to the original state?" as he walked inside the cabin and observed the damaged floor boards, day bed, and other artifacts. Kronenberger & Sons Restoration Manager Alan Petuska and Clark & Green Architect Steve McAlister explained that archived photographs in c. 1930 show that the Writing Cabin is in surprisingly good condition. The surrounding landscape, a hemlock grove considered a remnant of the "original forest," protected this wood-frame side-gable building with rough-sawn slab siding and an exterior stone chimney. Recreating the window sash and replacing the cedar shake roof, metal fittings, and hinges match as nearly as possible. The wood slab siding, as is the trim, is primarily intact but had areas repaired, and the fieldstone foundation and chimney are generally in good condition. Still, they required repair in places to preserve as much of the original state as possible.

### Education

Twenty-five students and faculty visited the Writing Cabin site during the Phase I rehabilitation. Bard College at Simon's Rock students from the Academy Literature and Social Studies classes convened on November 29, 2022, inside the Cottage and discussed a brief history of Five Acres and the cabin, analyzed some artifacts that we have saved and need to restore, and then toured the Writing Cabin. Students read small passages from Johnson's autobiography, published in 1933 and written at the Writing Cabin; compared and discussed excerpts from "The Creation" in Johnson's *God's Trombones*, published in 1927 and written in the Writing Cabin; examined and made inferences with approximately twenty artifacts from the Writing Cabin. Next, students walked near Alford Brook to stand by the Writing Cabin hill and reflect on the way of life in Great Barrington and the Berkshires nearly 100 years ago.

### Artist Residency

The James Weldon Johnson Fellowship in the Arts, a partnership with Bard College of Simon's Rock, is an artist residency that provides opportunities for emerging and mid-career scholars, writers, and artists to create great literature and art as they draw inspiration from Johnson's legacy in the place where he sought refuge and created important work. The two-week residency includes housing, financial support, and studio space on the college's bucolic 220-acre campus. Fellows spend time creating new work in the studio, drawing inspiration

from the writing cabin at Five Acres and nearby grounds, and talking with each other about legacy and the stories they are passing down, growth through collaboration, art history, and accessibility to resources.

We are grateful for your support. We are excited to share how your contribution and the educational convening visits helped us achieve a significant milestone this year.

### **Evolve our James Weldon Johnson Foundation**

The Phase I support is part of a larger rehabilitation project. The James Weldon Johnson Writing Cabin is another important extant structure that brings life to the history of African-American achievement and excellence in America. This place in Great Barrington "expands the American story." It preserved the spirit of creativity embraced by the local community and nurtured in the Berkshires for nearly a century or more. James Weldon Johnson was a noted poet, author, songwriter, diplomat, lawyer, and civil rights activist. Johnson, who wrote the lyrics for "Lift Every Voice and Sing," sought creative refuge in this small wooden cabin set in a quiet hemlock grove. After the rehabilitation, the Writing Cabin will be a writing study and studio for scholars and authors. It will be a small building for people to learn about Johnson's significant legacy in American culture.

### **Funding Need for Phase II Writing Cabin Rehabilitation Pending**

Interior Work: Completing interior work, including paneling repair, reconstruction of the day bed, installation of fiberboard wall and ceiling paneling, and interior restoration of the bathroom.

New electrical overhead service: Due to the complexity of this aspect of the project, the electrical overhead service will be in the second Phase.

Universal Accessibility: We have an opportunity to take positive action to defend accessibility to provide an equal opportunity to a unique cultural experience in America for future visitors.

Five Acres Conveyed and Abutting Land Option: The Town of Great Barrington Selectboard, on Monday, August 7, 2023, unanimously approved the waiver of the Town's right of first refusal to purchase 1.6 acres of land behind the Writing Cabin. These 1.6 acres have been conveyed to Rufus and Jill Jones to bring the property back to its original "five acres" for the "Five Acres" property named by James Weldon and Grace Nail Johnson in 1926. The deed is complete for the land and Jill and Rufus Jones "now own the entire 5 acres," which was recorded on October 20, 2023 in the Berkshire Middle District Registry of Deeds. **Note: The**



**option to purchase an additional, abutting 9.2 acres for \$400,000 by December 31, 2024, for programming and universal accessibility is on the table.**

Virtual and Digital Access: From the beginning, a manipulable 3D photographic scan was taken of the building at the outset of design to document existing conditions as thoroughly as possible.

Community Benefit: Completing the rehabilitation and stabilization plan protects the writing cabin site, allowing more access to students, residents, and tourists.

## **Testimonials**

The following are sample thank you notes that the Simon's Rock students wrote about the James Weldon Johnson Cabin field trip (Fall/Winter 2022):

- "What a treasure your work is for our children - our future!" - Provost
- "Thank you for hosting us at the historic summer home of James Weldon Johnson. I found the cabin and property interesting, as so little the property has changed over time." - Student
- "The educational lessons you gave us were so rich. I loved the inside of James's cabin and how you explained the plans for it in detail." - Student
- "Thank you for educating me and other people on the history of the cabin and the surrounding area." - Student
- "I want to thank you for letting us indulge in history by showing us and telling us who James Weldon Johnson is." - Student
- "I enjoyed going to the house and cabin and seeing the environment that James Weldon Johnson wrote his poetry. It was interesting to see the cabin renovation and the old artifacts from it. It was also relaxing to sit in the swinging chair and look at the stream." - Student
- "The cabin, while being reconstructed, was still in a very beautiful location, and it was exciting to be in the place where James Weldon Johnson wrote some of his works. I hope to come back to the cabin and this location eventually." - Student
- "I really enjoyed going to see the cabin and looking at the old artifacts. I think it was a great experience, and I loved sitting on the rocking chairs by the window as well. It was really peaceful and calming. Thanks for letting us come, and thank you for letting me play your piano too." - Student

**EDUCATIONAL CONVENING - COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, JUNE 2023**



[Photo: James Weldon Johnson Foundation, 2023]



**COMMUNITY AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, DECEMBER 2022**



[Photo: James Weldon Johnson Foundation, 2023]



**HISTORIC PRESERVATION - WRITING CABIN CEDAR SHAKE ROOF, SIDING, TRIM  
(SOUTH VIEW)**



[Photo: James Weldon Johnson Foundation, 2023]



**JAMES WELDON JOHNSON 2023 FELLOWS IN THE ARTS - GREAT BARRINGTON, 2023**

[Left to Right: Jacob Jones, Leslie Berns, Jill Rosenberg Jones, Junny Ann Hibbert, Pamela Woolford, Rufus Jones, Rachel Eskin Fisher, Pete Malinverni (not shown), Photo: James Weldon Johnson Foundation, 2023]

END  
Thank you.