

# A Real Florida Cracker

## James Jerome “Cracker” Johnson

By Daniel I. Cooper

In a video shot in the 1980s, three black men sit beneath mango trees between a carriage house at the estate of James Jerome “Cracker” Johnson (1877-1946), famed bootlegger and numbers runner who was killed at age 73 in a gunfight across from his bar in West Palm Beach.

Decades before his 1946 death, the mixed-race Johnson’s Jazz-era clashes with law enforcement became legendary. “Reno Bemoans Fate of ‘Cracker’ Johnson” one *Palm Beach Post* front-page headline blared in 1920, after one of Johnson’s many arrests, this time by federal prohibition agents. The newspaper went on to quip: “His capture has produced more long faces in Reno than a calamity entailing a heavy loss of life.”

The camera pans across the carved wood fireplace, Mediterranean-style relief sculpture with two cherubs, 12-foot ceilings, elaborate plaster molding. “Where are those cussing parrots?” the men joke, referring to the potty-mouthed parrots that reportedly used to curse out passersby to Johnson’s house. I moved to Florida in 2013 to live in Johnson’s 1926 restored mansion on Division Avenue in West Palm Beach in an attempt to see through his eyes. I came here at the behest of The Freshwater Project, a nonprofit organization that is dedicated to the preservation of the home of Cracker Johnson, and the surrounding segregated black community that he helped to found.

As I watched the 1980s video surreptitiously given to me by one of my neighbors, it struck me how many people have been compelled to document Cracker Johnson’s story, both inside and outside of history organizations. The men in the video debate, discuss, and reconstruct various parts of Cracker Johnson’s life. They spoke of the burly muscle men at his side. They dissected his shifting business alliances and how racial segregation affected the life of the man that reported nearly a million dollars in income in 1928 and how he may have later loaned the city of West Palm Beach \$50,000 to balance its budget.

In the video a man holds a yellowing flier—an announcement for Christmas and New Year celebrations at The Florida Bar Lounge, an establishment that Johnson owned. The artifact boasted “Three float shows nightly.” (Float shows were “drag” shows with men dressed like women.)

Johnson was born in Georgia, and later moved to Florida, where the term ‘cracker’ is considered favorable—a colorful rendition of Dixie slang denoting a toughness reserved for taming Florida wilds. Another version of how the term ‘cracker’ came to be used is the cracking sound of the 10-12-foot, braided leather whip used by Florida cowboys or cowhunters to communicate with each other and for herding cattle. But ‘cracker’ also defines the early pioneers of Florida as self-reliant, tenacious, and independent. ‘Cracker’ has also

been used to refer to a child of a white man and a black woman.

Around the same time that James Jerome Johnson traded the Peach State for the Sunshine State a railroad and oil tycoon by the name of Henry Flagler was changing the face of Southern Florida. As a matter of geography and sometimes politics, south Floridians were previously left to fend for themselves when it came to enjoying the provisions of proper society before Flagler's railroad completed construction of the station that would become West Palm Beach in 1894. On this swampy land, Flagler built lavish resorts. To do so, Flagler imported mostly black labor from the nearby Bahamas and across the South who could withstand the demands of heavy physical work in what can be stifling heat amidst infectious mosquitoes.

Palm Beach and the immediate surrounding community would eventually bloom seasonally with the arrival of snowbirds from the North seeking a means to escape harsher climates. The throngs of vacationers that would generate revenue had to be catered to and entertained.

In the decades after the death of Henry M. Flagler, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Earl Hines, Count Basie, and Lionel Hampton would all make regular stops to perform in nightclubs in West Palm Beach, adding to the allure of Southern Florida as a playground—but not for the black elite.

Although the black community was legally required to live in the Northwest district of West Palm Beach, a small section called Freshwater was where the black elite professionals

and businessmen such as Cracker Johnson built their own homes. The Vanguard Club—a highly selective group of Black professionals founded in 1910, and the Pride of Palm Beach Mason Lodge #447 was founded in 1914 with all black members. By the time Prohibition came around in 1920, Johnson was already poised to make a fortune through further blurring of the lines of convention and being connected to both sides of the law.

Bolita, bootlegging, number-running, and racketeering still seem to hover around the conversations about Johnson like blue bottle flies around mango trees. I haven't found a person with knowledge of his legitimate bars, movie theaters, pawn shop, gentleman's club, or capitalist ventures that didn't also have some knowledge of his involvement in the thoroughly established criminal underworld of Palm Beach County.

As I interview local historians and neighborhood stalwarts it still surprises me that there are people reluctant to talk about a man that died almost seventy years ago. Some of the mystery of his life is mired in the fact that there are still a great many people with too much respect, or fear, to even speak of the man. Cracker Johnson was known to shell out thousands of dollars to charities, construction projects, and to people, earning him unprecedented political capital and power for an African American in Florida at that time.

The Bolita numbers game that Johnson controlled in West Palm Beach was an international business. The little balls were actually a sophisticated early form of lottery, which stretched

Cracker Johnson. Courtesy *The Palm Beach Post*.



from Cuba, the host country, and followed every Spanish speaking immigration movement on the east coast. Cheating was rampant through a variety of ways, and the game provided slick profits to those in the know. Long after the wealth that Johnson undoubtedly made from importing and distributing liquor from the Caribbean had ended with Prohibition in 1933, he was still reaping sizable profits through the numbers game. Primarily through his legitimate establishment in the community, Johnson was at one time accumulating extravagant sums of money when entire Black communities were burned to the ground for doing just that. From 1880-1930, 282 black people were lynched in Florida, the highest rate in the South and more than twice the rate of Georgia, Louisiana, or Mississippi, according to historian Marvin Dunn, author of *The Beast in Florida: A History of Anti-Black Violence*.

Johnson was certainly a most visible figure, even if people only saw glimpses of him. He was well loved in the community in which he lived and generously supported the foundations upon which it was built.

For weeks after Johnson's 1946 murder, his name stayed in the headlines. He was killed under mysterious circumstances outside the Florida Bar on Rosemary Avenue, and he was transported past the white hospital to the segregated black hospital—Pine Ridge steps from his house on Division Avenue. When he succumbed to his gunshot wounds it sparked a legal fight over his estate that ensnared two judges.

In the decades since his death, the community around Cracker Johnson's home has deteriorated with the construction and then decline of Dunbar Village, a public housing project adjacent to the Freshwater section.

Much like the story of New Jersey's Nucky Thompson depicted on HBO's "The Boardwalk Empire," Cracker Johnson's story deserves to be told within an American context. To do so correctly gives us the chance to uplift the people of Palm Beach County and maybe even provide some perspective from which we can tackle today's problems.

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## About the Author

*Daniel I. Cooper was born in Glen Cove, New York. He earned his bachelor of science degree from Howard University. The former Coast Guard officer is currently studying marine biology and has a keen interest in history. From June 2013 to May 2014, Daniel lived in Mr. Johnson's former residence. The 1926 house is a contributing structure to the Northwest neighborhood's status as an official landmark for the National Trust for Historic Places and the headquarters of the Freshwater Project, a nonprofit community preservation and dialogue organization. For more information about the house or the Freshwater Project, please visit [www.historicfreshwater.org](http://www.historicfreshwater.org) or contact Serena Hopkinson 561-876-4405 or email [SAHopkinson@gmail.com](mailto:SAHopkinson@gmail.com).*





Above: One of Cracker Johnson's early houses in West Palm Beach. Courtesy Historical Society of Palm Beach County. At right: James Jerome "Cracker" Johnson. Courtesy *The Palm Beach Post*. Below left: Cracker Johnson's 1920s house on 14<sup>th</sup> Street and Division Avenue. Courtesy Richard A. Marconi.